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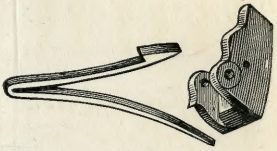

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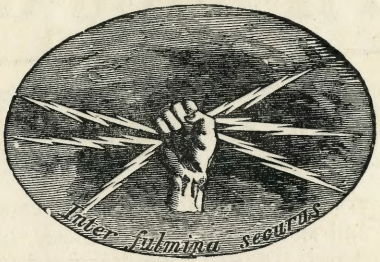
Trade 

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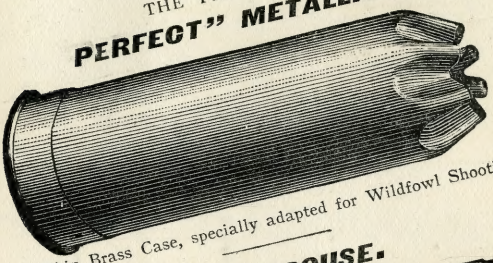

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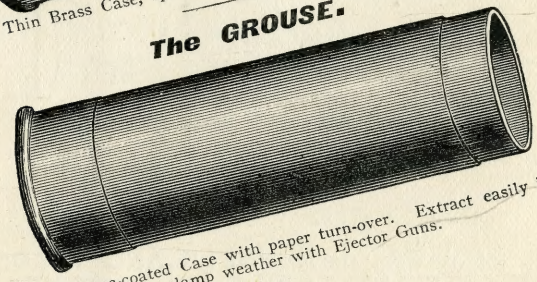

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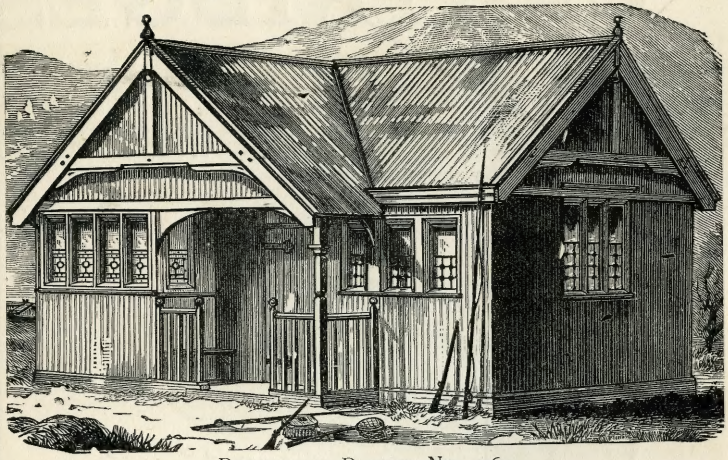

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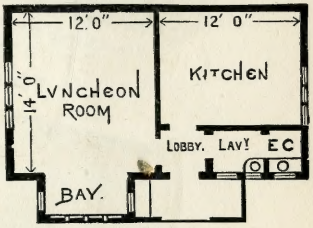

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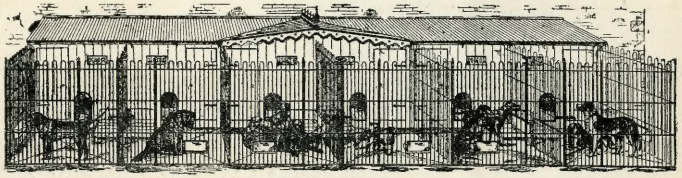

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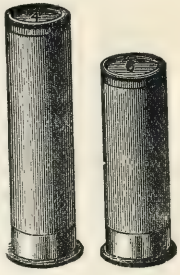

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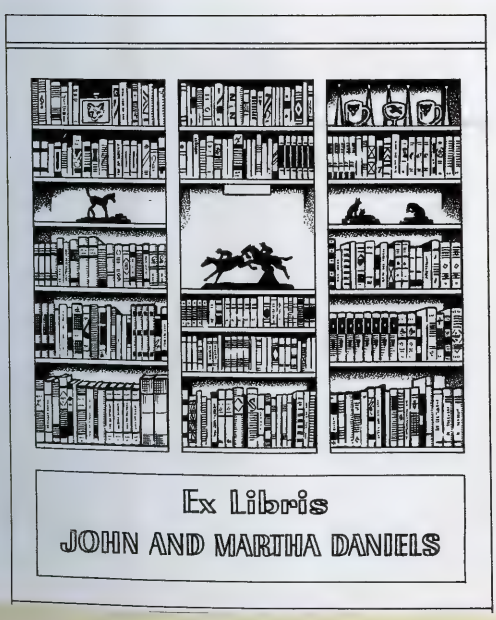

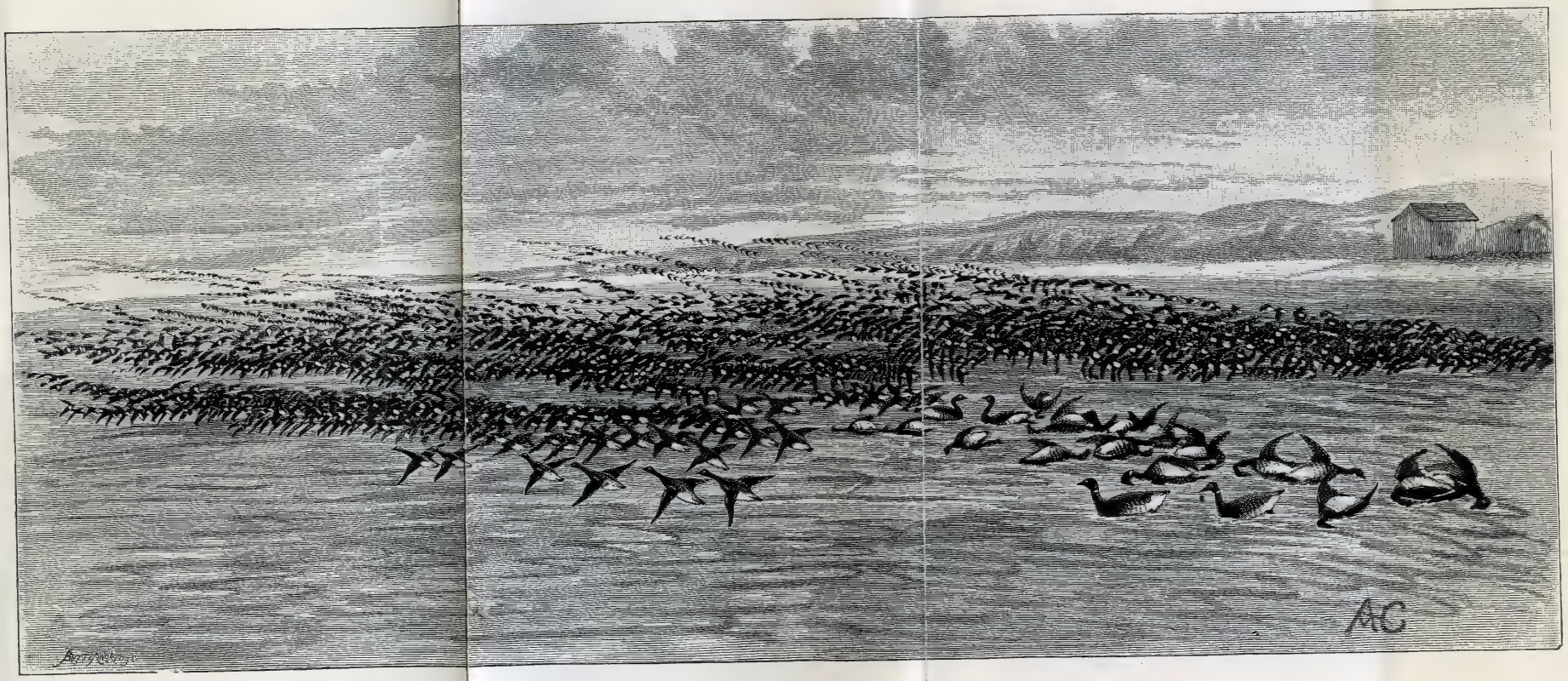

"AFTER THE SHOT."

BRENT GEESE IN THE BLIZZARD OF MARCH, 1886.

FIRST LESSONS

IN THE

ART OF

WILDFOWLING.

BY

ABEL CHAPMAN, F.Z.S.,

MEMBER OF THE BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION,
AUTHOR OF "BIRD-LIFE OF THE BORDERS;" JOINT AUTHOR OF "WILD SPAIN."

WITH THIRTY-SIX ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

AND

THREE BY CHAS. WHYMPER.

LONDON:

HORACE COX,

"THE FIELD" OFFICE, BREAM'S BUILDINGS, E.C.

—

1896.

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PREFACE.

FIVE-AND-TWENTY years' keen pursuit of wild-fowling, coupled with systematic study of the objects pursued, entitle one to write thereon with some degree of confidence. Yet I had no thought of adding to the carefully-prepared chapters on wild-fowl which already form one-half of my "Bird-Life of the Borders" (1889), until invited by *The Field*, last year, to contribute to that Journal the series of articles which now constitute the basis of the present volume. But in this instance I have treated the subject more from a sportsman's point of view, and less from that of a naturalist, than I had previously attempted. The ornithology of wild-fowling, nevertheless, I still regard as of co-equal interest and, in my own case, possibly the stronger point. Six more years' experience, at home and abroad, have also added much new material.

All observations in this book, it will be under-

stood, refer to the coast or to tidal waters unless otherwise specifically stated. My own experience, it should be added, has been gained chiefly on the northern and eastern coasts—less on the west; while in the south, and in Ireland, I have never fired a gun. Abroad, however, I have followed wildfowl from one end of Western Europe to the other.

To criticise is never pleasant; but I have judged it advisable to refer pointedly to certain malpractices which of late years have prevailed in coast-fowling, and which, through the grasping selfishness of a few, threaten to bring discredit on the pursuit as a whole.

The illustrations are mostly from rough sketches of my own, and their only merit must lie in their being drawn direct from life—that is, as nearly as wildfowl will ever permit such liberties. All have been done on the spot, while in several cases—as, for example, the plates at pp. 10, 14, 100, and others—the grouping and attitudes were originally sketched direct from the birds themselves, while "the artist" lay flat on the flooring boards of a gunning-punt at sea. The three beautiful drawings by Mr. Chas. Whymper will go far to make amends for my own rougher work.

To Mr. Howard Saunders it is once more my

pleasing duty—for the third time—to acknowledge my great indebtedness for his most kind assistance in revising the proof-sheets and curbing any undue vagaries.

It may not be inadmissible to mention that there now only remains to me the task of completing my record of ten or twelve voyages in Norway, Sweden, &c.—memoirs of spring-tides spent by swirling salmon-rivers and summers in angling for the smaller *salmonidæ;* of autumns passed on the mountains—some on snow-clad fjeld among reindeer and ptarmigan; others in northern forests where the elk, wolverine, and bear, the capercaillie and monster trout are the hunter's only companions—together with studies of the *feræ naturæ* and the wild game of a truly wild land. When this last task is complete, then indeed I'll sing:—

"*Nunc fessa vult inducias dura gens librorum!*"

A. C.

The Avenue, Sunderland,
February 20th, 1896.

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FIRST LESSONS IN THE ART OF WILDFOWLING.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT ARE WILDFOWL, AND WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

THE love of wildfowling is no commonplace sentiment, nor an everyday enthusiasm such as the keenness that field sports are wont to excite in the youthful breast. No: it is a thing beyond all that—an overmastering passion that neither difficulties nor obstacles can resist, nor even age and disability wholly quench. In many cases the passion may exist unknown—capable of development, but latent for lack of opportunity, since wildfowl are not found in every parish nor in every county. Even in such cases the seed may yet find growth, albeit in a difficult soil. It is beginning to germinate when the young fowler finds himself, morning after morning, in the wintry dawn, by the side of some little streamlet that traces a devious course, like a dark ribbon, through the snow-clad fields. He has come there

for the chance of the two or three snipe that little burn may hold. Note that he has reached the spot while it is yet too dark to see. He must await the tardy winter's dawn, and spend ten minutes, that pass like an hour, before there is light enough to shoot.

Now snipe are true wildfowl, though of humble rank; by nature they belong to that vagrant shifty race that make the world their home. No snipe would ever be found in that cress-choked ditch when the winter is mild, and the fields are green and brown; they only come there with the snow, when its pools are frozen and its sides flanked by snow-wreaths. These snipe have merely come in to feed on the open runners, because their accustomed haunts in the bogs and peat-hags of the moorlands beyond are ice-bound. This fact our young friend has discovered for himself; and he comes in to breakfast prouder of his two couple of snipe than of ten brace of partridge bagged among the turnips. Then one memorable morning, from that same rivulet, he springs an almost unhoped-for prize—his first teal. In the full tide of triumph, the little duck, though only a plain-plumaged female, is duly despatched to the bird-stuffer; the infection is complete. That boy has the making of a wildfowler for life.

Such enthusiasm as his is a precious possession; it is a thing worth cultivating, for it contains infinite

potentialities of keen enjoyment for years to come. More important still are its capacities for promoting qualities of patience, pluck, and self-reliance that may afterwards stand in good stead. How is this embryo zeal best to be shaped and turned to account? Take the youngster down to the coast, you say, and set him up with a fowling punt and big gun complete. Well, it is true that those appliances represent modern methods of fowling afloat in its highest and most exciting form—the cream of the sport. But that is not the way to initiate a beginner in this art. I am inclined rather to think that the premature possession of all this complete gear and artillery tends to cramp and narrow the scope of his early training. It is beginning at the wrong end, and, in my opinion, a mistake, to commence with dry and learned discussions on double-handed punts *versus* single, with precise tables of their respective measurements in feet and inches, or the rival merits of Hawker's or Latour's grain of punt-powder, of single four-bores or double eights, and so on to the end of the list. All these points will come to be considered in due time; but let the beginner first serve his apprenticeship in the minor branches of his art, before he troubles his mind with technical details, on which, by the way, hardly two wildfowlers are agreed.

The early training of the young wildfowler should

commence with shore-shooting, and thence graduate upwards through the infinite phases of "flighting," both by day and night, shooting under canvas, &c., before the more ambitious branches of the art are essayed. By this means a wider and more general knowledge is attained of the various classes of wild-fowl—their respective haunts and habits, and the different times and places at which each may most successfully be pursued—than is the case when a man starts away from the topmost rung of the ladder at first, full-fledged as a punt-gunner, with all the artillery and appliances, but with scant knowledge of how best to utilise them. Better, in short, get the experience first, the punt and gear afterwards.

It is the same, by analogy, in game-shooting, a thorough practical knowledge of which can only be acquired by learning to shoot to dogs. Driving comes afterwards, as a refinement. The man who has served his apprenticeship to shooting over dogs, and has truly appreciated its lessons, is a made hunter, and may also be a first-rate shot under all conditions; the other can never be more than a shooter, albeit, perchance, a brilliant one. The latest exponents of the new school in sport (though they have done excellent service in dispelling many popular illusions) have, in my humble opinion, allowed their enthusiasm for *driving* alone to carry them too far in their condemnation of other forms

of sport. It will be a bad day for the gun when the hunting dog disappears from British fields and fells; and already, I gather, good dogs are becoming scarce—and no wonder; for, with them, the *nascitur non fit* rule may well be reversed. But I only refer incidentally to the subject, and, at present, it is hardly to the point.

The first object of the aspiring fowler must be to discover some spot which is frequented by the birds in fair numbers—such places (that is, in the British islands, and at the end of the nineteenth century) being necessarily on the coast or on tidal waters. But many curious ideas still prevail, involving extraordinary misconceptions as to what are wildfowl and where are their haunts. I pass over the current belief that the Bass Rock and Ailsa Craig are "first-rate places for geese!" inasmuch as the unfortunate misnomer of the fowl that *do* breed on those rocks will probably for ever perpetuate that error. It seems unnecessary to tell intelligent readers that Solan geese (properly called gannets) are no more geese than bustards are buzzards, or Bombay ducks available for practice with a punt-gun. Yet excellent and experienced inland sportsmen frequently ask:—"Are not, say, Flamborough or St. Abbs' Head (or any other rocky headland) good localities for wildfowl?"

The question is, what are wildfowl? And to answer it first in a negative way, I may reply that,

wherever wildfowl *may* be found, they are certainly *not* to be looked for at such places as those named. Nothing is more abhorrent to the nature of true wildfowl, their tastes and requirements, than the sheer crags and reefs of an iron-bound coast. What are wildfowl? Last summer my brother Alfred went to Spitsbergen in one of the big yachting-steamers. There were many passengers, and perhaps an equal number of guns and rifles. When the ship first cast anchor one evening in Ice-fjord, a prospecting party was sent ashore to reconnoitre. They returned with the report that "snipes abounded," and recommended a plentiful provision of No. 8 cartridges for the morrow. To prevent disappointment, my brother mildly suggested that there were no snipes in Spitsbergen; but was met with the response: "Why, you've not been on shore; how do you know?" The Spitsbergen snipes, of course, proved to consist of a few purple sandpipers flitting along the shores, and the market for No. 8 cartridges came down with a run. Yet these good people proceeded to bring on board numbers of guillemots, auks, and puffins —even gulls and terns were not despised—honestly believing that such birds were really wildfowl. I remember similar incidents in Spitsbergen in 1881, and frequently on the Norway coast, where the semi-domestic fleets of eider-fowl seem irresistible to the gunning tourist. Some people seem firmly to believe that every bird that swims or flies by the sea must

rank as "wildfowl." Perhaps the fact that Colonel Hawker included in his descriptive list of wildfowl all birds that happened to be met with by the coast-fowler (such as gulls, grebes, divers, and the like) has induced a misconception, though that such birds should have been mentioned was quite right and proper. For those who can find sport or pleasure in shooting rockfowl and seabirds such as these, there are, no doubt, no better places than Flamborough, the Bass Rock, &c.; but let it be clearly understood that no true wildfowler would ever dream of wasting a cartridge on such trash, any more than a game-shooter would fire indiscriminately at crows, starlings, or peewits. Well, I hope I have made it clear what are *not* wildfowl; that the gulls and guillemots, the cormorants and herring-spitting gannets of the Bass, and other common seafowl of the coast, have no claim to rank as such. The true wildfowl are a very different class—different both in nature and in haunts.

The birds which properly concern the wildfowler may be defined as including all the six British species of wild geese; all of those kinds of wild ducks which feed exclusively on the surface (never diving for their food), together with a certain limited section of the diving ducks; and, thirdly, some of the larger wading birds. The haunts of all these are the low-lying mud flats and tidal oozes, where for mile upon mile saltings and featureless foreshores flank some broad

estuary, or line the margin of a sound or arm of sea. Note, there is no grand coast scenery; there is no "scenery" at all. There are neither rocks nor cliffs; for ten miles one can hardly see an object bigger than a wild goose. In such places, wherever the long waving sea-grass, or *Zostera marina*, can find roothold in the rotten ooze, there is a feeding ground for geese by day, ducks by night—provided always that the place is sufficiently remote from the haunts of men, desolate and extensive.

Now, let the young wildfowler visit such a place. What will he see? At high tide, nothing but grey sea, with the barren sand-dunes of the opposite shore outlined against a wintry sky. But now it is half-ebb; and, as the waters recede, bank after bank appears, till as far as eye can reach extends a dismal swamp! No life, no object to break the monotony of dead-level browns and greens, save a few weed-clad stones and drift bunches of sea-ware. There is a stray gull or two, some small waders, and perhaps a rigid heron stands stiff as a dead grey stump by the side of a tide creek, his neck bent forward, intent on flounders. Lifeless and inanimate the whole scene may appear; but, remember, the area is enormous—it is too wide a prospect to measure with the naked eye. Now, survey it carefully with the binoculars, and quite a new world comes into view. Those desolate flats are in reality crowded with life. That swarming mass of dark

dots, you now distinguish out on the very verge of the tide, are all Brent geese, 500 strong. There is another smaller company of them beyond, on the open channel, and one sees the water fly as the ganders fight and chase each other; for it is a mild season, and amorous tendencies are exuberant, albeit anachronous in mid-winter. Some of the geese are still feeding afloat, as one may see by the recurring appearance of white spots amidst their dark phalanx. That effect is produced by their pure white sterns being exposed as they turn their bodies vertically upwards in the water to reach the fronds of sea-grass growing beneath them. The geese, however, are now only toying with the zostera, for it is mid-day; they have already breakfasted early, and all geese enjoy a siesta at noon. In the afternoon they will come flying up the oozes in a dozen streamy lines, with a clatter that resounds for miles, like a pack of hounds in full cry, and will then commence dining in earnest. Then, one reflects, will be the time for the punt-gunner as the flood tide comes creeping back across the mud. But he will hardly approach even then within three gunshots of the geese, unless he can find some chance "advantage" over these wariest and most watchful of wildfowl. He must have the luck to get his boat sheltered by some favouring creek—a tiny depression hardly perceptible in the level ooze—or he may trust to the stratagem of pushing his

punt well into that patch of tawny sea-foam that drifts in on the flood. The geese, it is just possible, may then fail to detect the masked battery; but it is a cunning scheme, and well executed, if it escapes their ceaseless vigilance and wondrous vision.

One word here as to the accompanying illustrations: It is right to explain that, owing to the dead-level nature of the spots frequented by wildfowl, it is necessary, in every case, to take some small licence in perspective; for otherwise, correctly to depict what one really does see, the whole subject would have to be crowded into a horizontal space no deeper than about three of these printed lines. The frontispiece, I should also add, has no immediate connection with the subject of the present chapter, inasmuch as we are now only taking a preliminary ramble, and have not yet launched the gunning-punt. That sketch attempts to represent one of the writer's most successful shots at geese, made some years ago—(during the blizzard of March, 1886)—when, under favouring conditions, he had the luck to approach within 80 or 90 yards of one of those vast armies of Brents that come in severe seasons—a thing one does (in England) but twice or thrice in a lifetime! This pack was about 2000 strong. In the hands of an artist such a scene might form a splendidly animated picture of wild bird-life; but, rough as it is, I still hope the sketch may convey some faint

WILDFOWL IN THEIR HAUNTS. (BRENT GEESE.)

Drawn from life.

idea of the appearance of massed wildfowl just after a shot.

One essential characteristic in all such scenes must inevitably be wanting in their counterfeit presentment—that is, the sense of sound. For the ear is held as much enthralled as sight itself. The crash of sound from a thousand throats and the roar of rising wings are necessary accompaniments; but such can never be caught by camera, nor reproduced on printed page.

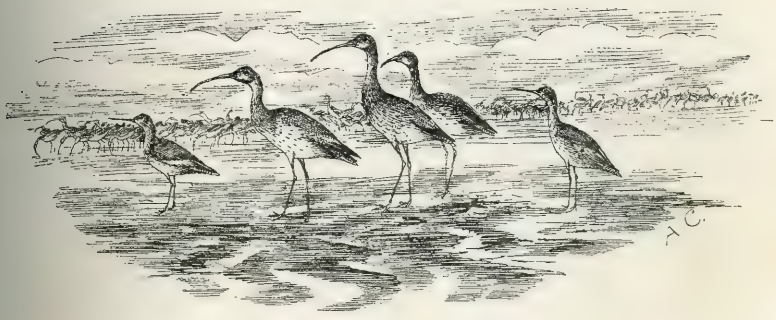
But we were spying the flats. That little dusky patch, far out in mid-ooze, is a nice bunch of mallards, full fifty in number, though a table-cloth would almost cover them as they huddle together, all fast asleep and with their bills tucked in behind their shoulders. You do not see mallards every day on the oozes; but these few have stayed "inside" to-day because it blew hard last night and at dawn this morning. Those ducks know full well there will be a heavy sea running out there beyond the bar, and they prefer to stay and face a known risk here in shelter, rather than endure the certainty of a miserable day tossing and tumbling amidst angry waves.

At the moment they are absolutely inaccessible to man and all his devices, since no punt could approach within two miles of where they sleep away the mid-day hours on the midst of those wastes of rotten ooze. But it is just possible, though not probable, that these mallards, like the Brents, may offer a

chance to the puntsman on the afternoon tide. He will find them then in very different mood, That subtle, mysterious phenomenon, the flood tide, stealing so silently and insidiously over the oozes, threading a sinuous course inch by inch, now pausing for an instant, then spreading laterally or pushing forward by each tiny hollow or depression to the next beyond, exerts an extraordinary influence on the wild-life of the flats. Its advance guard—a mere film, barely thicker than a sheet of paper, but of more resistless power than the Scotch express—penetrates on these dead levels many yards beyond the visible tide. As its first tiny warning trickle approaches the erewhiles somnolent ducks, the effect is electrical. Now, one hardly recognises the fowl; it seems incredible that what, but a few minutes ago, appeared an inert, inanimate object, closely resembling a little patch of weed-covered stones, has been transformed into fifty of the most watchful creatures, all alert and vigilant beyond words. Long necks erect, and snake-like forms, bespeak the change, and the fowler who has patiently "waited on," hoping against hope for an hour or more, now realises that the odds have altered 100 to 1 in favour of the fowl.

There are other birds on the ooze that are not asleep. The waders in dusky clouds came hurrying in with the ebb, and now occupy each bank and patch of mud as quickly as the receding tide lays it

bare. To and fro across the flats they course, nimble as mice, many running breast deep into the shallows, and petulantly turning over each fresh frond of sea-grass in search of the minute forms of marine life, insect or crustacean, that it may conceal. These birds, as the binocular shows, are chiefly redshanks, dunlins, ring-plovers, knots, and such-like small fry. But there are curlews probing in the shallow channels; and beyond, where the mud



CURLEWS AND REDSHANKS.

glistens white with the *débris* of cockle-shells, feed a company of godwits on the more sandy ground. They are easily distinguishable; for they look almost blue by comparison with the warmer-toned plumage of the curlews.

Mud, however, is hardly the true home of the wading birds. To interview them in force one must visit the sandflats that lie outside, on the verge of the sea. The nearest point of these is still five

miles off; but the tide is now dead low, so we can walk out there before it is dark.

This is a region that would cause the "carpenter" to weep for weeks, so vast is the accumulation of sand. The sea is yet two miles away, the white line of breakers dimly discernible against a leaden sky. This is the haunt of the "hen-footed" fowl. Sweep it with the glass, and it teems with life. Over there, where the sand is wet, are hundreds of dunlins and ring-plovers, that, among the myriad worm-casts, the unaided eye had not detected, though only 300 yards off. See, there are some scores of them at a quarter that distance. That long dark line beyond the channel is a herd of curlews, godwits, and knots, a thousand strong. There are two more big companies to the west, and further away still the brown sand is dotted with white gulls; but, stay, among those white dots are several of different tone—not purer, but brighter, more defined and glossy. A more careful survey shows that these are sheld-ducks, mostly asleep, awaiting the hour when the tide shall uncover the mussel-scaups far away at the head of the bay, whither they will then proceed to dine. Some are waking up already, and show the dark vertical breastband as they walk about. The sheld-ducks (almost as much so as the waders) observe no special hours, but feed by day or night, just as the tide may serve.

Away to the east, where the main channel cuts

SHELD-DUCKS AND OYSTER-CATCHERS.

From the life.

an ever-varying course towards the sea, the glasses carefully scan the horizon in search of the big grey geese that in October were wont to congregate there. But it is January now, and the grey geese have gone. They will be back in March; but their vacant place is still occupied. A dark, compact line of birds sit dry along the bank, others drift listlessly on the tideway. They are too far off to distinguish, but by experience we know well enough what they are. They are the bulk of the local stock of mallards, of which the handful we left asleep on the mud behind are but a tithe. Their company is sheltering there in preference to weathering it out on the rough sea beyond. And out on that same sea, slightly sheltered by the headland ten miles beyond, we know (though we cannot see from here) there ride the whole stock of wigeon, defiant of wind and wave, tossing about till an hour after dark, when they, and the mallards too, will come swarming in to feed all night on the zostera of the mud-flats.

There are other fowl, too, besides the wigeon, out in that bay. If one takes a boat and cruises round it, one is almost sure to fall in with several of the diving ducks—scaup, golden-eye, &c.—as well as with long-tailed ducks, eiders, and black swarms of scoters. There also are the grebes and big sea-divers (*Colymbi*); but we must leave them for another day.

CHAPTER II.

FLIGHT-SHOOTING BY DAY AND NIGHT.

WE have now surveyed our ground, and formed some idea of its stock of fowl and their distribution —how is our young friend to secure them?

I recently came across a book on British field sports, in which occurs a remark something like this:—"Wildfowl-shooting with a punt and big gun we care nothing for; it does not come within our ideas of what constitutes sport. . . . On the other hand, to *stalk wildfowl on an open shore requires no little strategy*." The italics are mine, but the sentiment is typical of many a similar remark in other books.

Now, if the writer of this remark—in his own line a thoroughly practical sportsman—had been candid, the sentence in question would have read thus: "Wildfowling with the stanchion gun we know nothing of, never having been aboard a punt in our lives. To approach wildfowl on an open shore, it is the only available means; but on the inland lakes and marshes to which our experience has

been confined, there are other methods, such as stalking," &c.

The tendency, among sporting writers, to magnify their own particular form of sport by decrying other branches, of which they are perhaps (as in this case) totally ignorant, is much to be deplored. Personally, it has been my good luck to enjoy keenly every form of sport that has come in my way. There are variations in difficulty and degree, each has its special attractions, its advantages and disadvantages, its strong points and its drawbacks. But successful wildfowling with the stanchion gun—whether in regard to its fascinating excitement and the judgment and skill it demands on the one hand, or its hardships and uncertainties on the other, together with the measure of pluck, patience, and dogged perseverance it calls into play—stands second to no branch of sport to which Britons are addicted. The qualities named are worth the cultivation; and remember, that though sport may represent but the playground of life, yet it serves an important office in developing points of character and temperament, which may prove of incalculable value and enduring advantage.

But I must "stow preaching" and consider how we are to outmanœuvre these various wild birds, one and all. As above suggested, it may be laid down as a rule, that no amount of strategy—be it the most elaborate ever devised or devisable by man—will ever enable a human being with a shoulder-gun to

"stalk wildfowl on an open shore." The expression is ridiculous and its terms contradict each other. With a punt, under favouring conditions and at suitable times (and assuming that there is water to float the boat within shot), it may be occasionally effected; but for the moment we are not concerned with punts, and have, with much diffidence, undertaken to show the aspiring young wildfowler how he may obtain shots at wildfowl without one.

The birds above referred to are thus inaccessible where they sit, but they will not always remain there. Wildfowl of all kinds, as is well known, take certain regular flights between their feeding grounds and the places where they spend the hours of rest. These flight-lines, of course, vary infinitely, both as to time and place, between the different species, according to their respective habits.

Thus geese and the diving-ducks (pochards excepted) may be described, in general terms, as feeding by day and spending the night at sea; the game-ducks reverse this procedure, feeding chiefly by night; while the wading tribe, whose food lies on the "dry" and must be got by probing, take little note of day or night, but regulate their movements by the tide. They feed on the ebb and rest during flood tide, whatever the hours may be.

This is intelligible enough; but when we come to seek for precise reasons why ducks should prefer

the night and geese day, and so forth, we get on to less clear ground. True, it is obvious that diving birds require daylight to find subaquatic food, especially those which actually catch fish (such as the mergansers, grebes, and divers; and, to a less degree, the scaup and golden-eye, which prey on living crustacea; whereas the pochard, though strictly a diver, feeds entirely on vegetable matter—aquatic plants and grasses—hence he is able to obtain his food in the dark, and, for some inscrutable reason, prefers to do so. But why should the geese and surface-feeding ducks display such diametrically opposite tastes? Geese, beyond a doubt, are somewhat dull of vision in the dark—that is, of course, comparatively speaking; but the circumstance is probably rather an effect than the cause of their diurnal habits. One cannot but admire their sense and good taste, since paddling about on sloppy ooze on a black-dark night cannot be very good fun; and, besides, their preference for daylight affords the coast-gunner some of his finest sport, though the geese probably do not take *that* into consideration. No, we cannot assign any precise reason for these things, beyond the apparent fact that "it is their nature to."

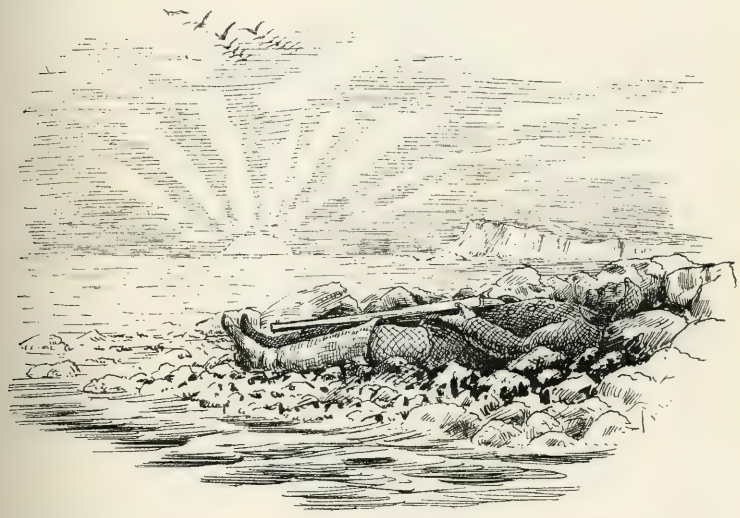
To begin with the wading birds, whose conspicuous beauty of form, plumage, and flight inevitably attract the young fowler, these, and all non-swimming fowl must necessarily take wing as soon as the flowing

tide covers the flats; and as surely will they return thither when the sand-banks begin to reappear. Every species of wader may be secured by watching the lines of flight, in or out, at half-tide. Their favourite resting-places are those wild sand wastes that are never covered, except at spring tides—then the waders are driven to the main shore, or even to land. I have seen big ploughed fields grey with godwits. To shoot these birds, remember that all wildfowl (though waders least of all) prefer flying over water, or if a neck of land must be crossed, they will choose the narrowest point. Now presuming (as is frequently the case) that a strip of sand-dunes lies across the line of flight, it is easy at spring tides to see the spots at which the tides most nearly meet. That is where the birds will pass; and should there be several such places, select the one where permanent pools serve to bridge over, to the birds' eyes, the interval. This is the spot to form a rude sort of butt, across which the flights of waders will speed twice a day, like grouse on a "drive."

It remains to add that the gunner must keep very low, far more so than for grouse, since these wild birds are tenfold more vigilant than game, and, moreover, they come far higher. The chief prize here is the godwit, which never flies low except in face of a full gale. It is seldom one gets a real "rake" into the big battalions of godwits, except in

FLIGHT OF WADERS ON THE EBB.

the wildest wintry weather. Curlews, on the other hand, often come in low and well, usually, too, giving notice from afar of their approach, which godwits on passage do not. Plovers rarely come to bag in numbers (except in early autumn), for the big "stands" of these birds, when found on the ooze, always betake themselves inland at high tide, while



FLIGHT-SHOOTER IN POSITION.

the grey plovers are rarely seen more than six or eight together—usually only two or three in the midst of a cloud of dunlin, like whales among minnows.

Should there be no sandhills on their line of flight (which in that case crosses open flats), select a projecting point or elbow of the main tide-channel—

if possible, where there is a bed of rough shingle, on which concealment is more easy. The birds' flight is sure to coincide roughly with the line of the channel, but they will come high, and the gunner must remember that his only chance lies in a vigilant look-out and absolute quiescence, for, though prostrate, a grey form amidst grey stones, he lies practically in full view, and must never move a muscle till the birds are right overhead. In such spots he is also likely to get shots at geese, mergansers, golden-eyes, &c., passing up and down the tideway, but it is necessary to have a retriever within call, or a dead bird may be swept away as in a mill race.

A general knowledge of the flight-lines of the wading birds is often useful to the fowler; for on blank days, when other sport is slack, and no game in view, these tidal flights through some funnel in the sand-links or along the channel, if he knows their lines and localities, will at times afford a very pretty hour's shooting, and perhaps, on a stormy day, six, eight, or ten couples of curlew, godwit, knots, and plover, instead of an empty bag.

In early autumn, when they first come, even the larger waders—whimbrel, godwit, &c.—may be shot from the dunes during high water of spring tides; but this is only in August and September. In winter, no desirable fowl are foolish enough to run such risks.

From the life.

GODWITS.

Before dismissing this beautiful and most fascinating family—to which as a naturalist I have given greater prominence than a sportsman, purely as such, would accord—it should be added that it is in early autumn (in August and September) when they present the greatest variety. We have then the parent birds returning from their far northern homes, and still in the exquisite plumage of the breeding-season—faded and worn, it is true; yet few living creatures present a lovelier picture than godwit, knot, or grey plover in full nuptial dress. Then come also the sanderling and curlew-sandpiper, whose breeding haunts (with those of the knot and bar-tailed godwit) are still practically unknown—though I know myself where *one pair* of sanderlings nested in 1892! Thither come in August the greenshank and whimbrel, ruffs and reeves, little stints, and that greatest prize, as well as one of the most graceful of bird forms, the spotted redshank. But these concern the naturalist more than the gunner, and space forbids detailed descriptions of their respective haunts and habits. To the ornithologist they represent much; but I strongly deprecate these birds being regarded as "game," as well as indiscriminate shooting into their closely-joined ranks.

And now, our pupil having killed (on paper, at least) some of each of the larger wading birds, we may essay a more difficult task—that of shooting duck with the shoulder-gun.

The morning flight, when the day-feeding fowl come in to the oozes and those of night depart to their diurnal resting places, is a favourable opportunity for securing certain kinds. But the phenomenon is so well known, and I have before so minutely described it in my "Bird-Life of the Borders" (p. 158 *et seq.*), that to go into detail would involve repetition. Moreover, though the spectacle is most interesting, it rarely happens that any of the game-ducks are secured by the early flight-gunner. Both mallard and wigeon go out to sea a full hour before dawn, when it is still pitch dark, and at a height at which no gun will reach them. I write here of the hard-shot harbours of England. In very wild weather one may get a chance shot or two, but this is not worth taking into consideration. One is as likely, in such weather, to find them flighting at noon as at daybreak, since the heavy seas keep them on the move. I have a record of bagging nine geese and ducks (besides losing others), one January afternoon in an hour and a half's flighting between 1 and 2.30 p.m., but the wind, snow, and sea that afternoon were something not to be forgotten, and the cold so bitter, that one had to get up and have a run at intervals, thereby, of course losing other chances. The chief spoils obtained at early flight are brent geese, golden-eye, merganser, and other divers, with game-ducks as occasional bits of luck.

If, then, these latter are not to be had on flight,

can they be secured at the points to which they are flying? No; not on the coast, since they will either alight on the open sea, or on dead-level sand-flats, where they are equally inaccessible. That is the rule and their regular habit; but wind and wave are potent factors, and when a north-easter blows for days, and a boiling sea rages along the coast, the middle distance a tumbling chaos of breakers, and even the far horizon is distorted and upheaved as by the gambols of myriad sea-monsters—then where are the ducks? Perhaps as safe as ever, sitting thick as they can stow on some rocky islet miles away across that raging surf where no boat could live for five minutes, much less land. Yes, they have another haunt, too—that long rock-scar, or reef, a peninsula at low tide, an island when high, is sure to hold them now. If the wind holds till dawn, one may do wonders there. But—you object—that scar is more than six miles away, with an ankle-deep country lane for two-thirds of the distance; how can we be there before dawn? Well, that is the price; we must pay it, or stay at home.

When on the coast, one sometimes hears marvellous tales of the numbers of mallards that are occasionally secured by fishermen under such conditions as just described—of powder flasks emptied in half an hour, and skeels (those long withy-woven baskets used to send fish away) piled full of ducks. It is as well not to believe too much Fishermen, no

doubt, are always on the spot, ever ready to seize a favourable opportunity at short notice; they are, moreover, amphibians, impervious to weather. Still, they can spin a yarn as well as most folks, and it is amusing to listen to their traditional lore concerning wildfowl in their fathers' days, and in the good old time before them.

It is, however, within my own knowledge that from eight to a dozen mallards and wigeon—on rare occasions a score, and once an even larger number—have been bagged under such conditions by a single gun; though the casual amateur may visit the coast during a lifetime without getting one of these golden opportunities. Needless to say such work involves extreme hardship and exposure—would that pen could describe those scenes. Let me, at least, try to recall one memory.

The gale blows harder than ever, and the December dawn breaks on a terribly wild and wintry scene. Along the sea-face loom black rocks, half hidden in gloomy reek and spray, while columns of white water shoot up heavenwards, as some mountainous breaker hurls itself against the barrier. Fifty feet sheer shoots up that vertical avalanche of shattered waters, and above all the roar of wind and wave we hear the hollow, thunderous crash of its concussion. The driving scud whirls away in clouds to leeward, blended with the snow and tawny flakes of foam. But through that murk (as we foretold

last night), there fly the ducks to the refuge of our reef. Since the first sign of dawn they have been coming in files, fighting their way to windward, regardless of the puny popping of two 12-bores that already have done some deadly work. Headlong falls a green-headed drake: two more to the left (the only two together) bounce on the rocks, and ere the empty cartridges are replaced, another lot looms in view. They are six wigeon; be careful to drop them on the rocks, or they are lost. Well done! That second-barrel bird was a "teaser," but he fell stone-dead, and floats, paddles up, on a tiny pool.

Now, for ten minutes, a snow squall obscures the view, and as it subsides, a dozen ducks squat on the reef within thirty yards. A little schooner is scudding by, under almost bare poles. She is laden, and the cross seas sweep her decks, overwhelming the helmsman, who stands lashed to the wheel. She seems well in the fairway of the firth, yet seafarers shake their heads. "They must carry more fore-and-aft canvas, or they'll scarce weather the point." But that little double-reefed topsail is the only stitch of canvas left to those poor mariners—the rest was all blown to ribbons last night.

Listen—we cannot be mistaken—that was the clang of Grey geese, and for a moment we catch a glimpse of a storm-driven "skein" standing in, close hauled, towards the fowler; here come two mallards also, cleaving to windward. The geese tack two points, and

he lets the ducks go by—*altiora petit*, but in vain, for the "Pink-feet" wheel back, and in a moment vanish, like phantoms, into space. Mark! what comes now? A big bird, black and of duck-like flight. It is only a cormorant; yet we watch interestedly how he claps down on the rock, poising his long body horizontally to evade the full force of the blast. Ah, blunderer! here, while you waste precious moments noting the attitudes of a codling-gulper—here are six ducks right on you, all unseen till far too near. The result is *flurry* and the right-barrel bird bungled almost on the muzzle. We note the lesson (for the fiftieth time), and for another glorious hour the work keeps constant and regular. The two men recognise that this is a chance in a lifetime, and every energy is concentrated. They know their work, lie low beneath the ridge, and let the fowl come *well* in. Close quarters and clean kills is the grand receipt, but bear its prologue in mind—"forward and high," especially with the left.

Now for ten minutes hardly a bird has come—is it over? Frozen fingers refuse to find the watch hidden in the recesses of brine-drenched overalls; but the tide has turned this hour gone, and now the fowl are finding foothold on the fast-baring sandflats beyond the bay. Yes, it is over, and as they gather the spoils the two fowlers reflect that never again, in all human probability, can they expect so favour-

able a combination of wind and wave, time and tide, as on that wild December morning.

That evening we hear that the little schooner has been lost—dashed to atoms on the rocks by Dunternness, and one poor fellow has lost his life. That stormy wind that brought us sport, will also carry woe and sorrow unspeakable to some little log hut by a far Norwegian fjord.

It will thus be seen that duck-shooting by day with the shoulder-gun is no easy matter. It involves a very intimate knowledge of the coast-line for miles, with all the different resorts of the fowl according to weather, to say nothing of much hard work—as often as not, for nothing.

There are, however, remote spots on the coast, especially in North Britain, and the outer islands, where the fowl, though relatively scarcer, are less harassed, and consequently less intensely difficult to secure. Again, the fowler may chance on some odd nook or corner to which a few ducks have taken a fancy—their choice is sometimes inexplicable, and it may be only temporary. The coast-gunner should always keep an eye open for such casual chances. A point or patch of ordinary tidal rocks has sometimes a special attraction for ducks; it may be some spring or drain of fresh water, or perhaps no visible cause may exist.

On one occasion I noticed a fox, carrying something that looked like a duck, coming away

from a tidal reef some few miles beyond a small estuary, where we were then shooting. I thought it over, and a few days afterwards, when the tide was low at dawn, tried the place, with the result that my brother and I fired seven double shots at incoming mallards, before the sun was fairly clear of the sea. The following year I tried it again, but saw nothing. Whether the fox incident had any real bearing or not, I never could satisfy myself; at any rate reynard on that occasion brought us luck.

I omit mention of flighting at salient angles of the coast, or promontories commanding bays or harbour entrances, since such spots are well known, and usually occupied three deep. If, as first-comer, one secures the best place and effects a shot, there ensues a race for the prize between two or three predatory pothunters, each firing off his antiquated musket at 300 or 400 yards as a colourable pretext for claiming possession. The combination of rivalry with petty larceny amuses once, but not oftener.

So much for the daytime. We have developed all our attacks, and at least kept the ducks moving. Some days this is about the only result achieved; but on others a fair measure of luck rewards one's labour, and at longer intervals comes a bumper of grateful memory.

Now we pass to the night. The nocturnal resorts of ducks—on the coast at least—are well known.

Where the zostera, or sea-wrack, spreads its emerald fronds over the ooze, there is their feeding ground.

The system of flight-shooting by night is so well known as to need no long remarks; indeed, on almost every part of the British coast the pursuit is done to death. Its essentials are low tide and a good moon. The fowler must reach his post before dusk, bringing an armful of straw or bents to lie on. He can thus, at least, keep dry, though his bed is the ooze, and a slimy stone his pillow, during his one or two hours' vigil.

Few nights are really favourable. Let us select the last week of full moon for flighting. The first night, the moon is high, the heavens bright and cloudless—you may as well go home, for you will see nothing, even at half range. A clear sky combined with moonlight, is useless. The next night is heavily overcast; it is dark and raining. Hardly a better opportunity, though you will probably stay on the chance of the weather clearing.

At length comes the perfect night; the moon is now low, and a strong breeze blows directly towards her; the whole sky is slightly overcast, and against those translucent clouds, ducks can be seen further than they can be killed. Still, try to turn the little light there is to best advantage. Select your post where shallow pools lie before you as you face the moon; they serve to reflect her light, and are also attractive to fowl. Remember that the speed of

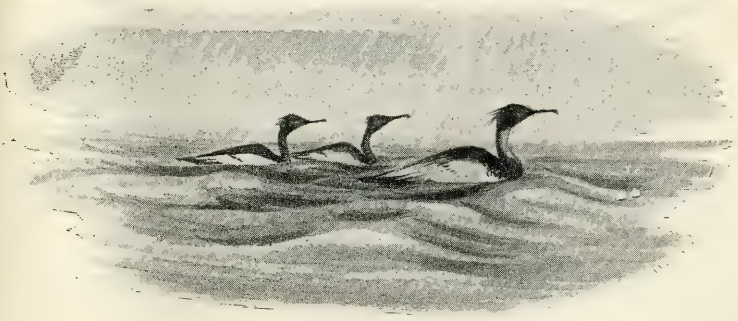
ducks is very great, and they are only in sight for a few yards at most. To kill them requires smart work, comparable to shooting driven grouse from a butt placed too near the sky line. Unless action is almost as quick as thought, the birds are on you ere a gun can be raised, and at night there is no turning round.

There is no prettier shooting in the world than flighting during the short time it lasts. From a dozen to twenty or even thirty duck to one gun in half an hour, is warm work; but such results have fallen to my share on more than one occasion, though they can only be looked for nowadays on the far off waters of foreign lands. On British coasts each estuary or patch of tidal mud fairly bristles, at night, with guns; and, though even here lucky nights will now and then occur, they are few and far between.

That they do so occur, a record of the following performance, which took place subsequent to writing the above, will serve to show. During intensely severe frost, in the early part of February of the present year (1895), two gunners, brothers, shooting together on three consecutive nights just preceding the "full of the moon," shot and fairly bagged 51 ducks—two-thirds of which were mallard, the remainder wigeon, with the exception of a single pair of scaup-ducks. The best individual score was 18 ducks to one gun in a night's shooting of about three hours, and, in the dark, several winged and lightly-

wounded birds were lost at the moment. Next morning a shore-shooter secured seven ducks without firing a shot. During this frost, the same gunner, on another occasion, secured nine mallards *without* the assistance of the moon. These nine were obtained in eight shots, *all sitting*. As regards gunnery alone, this compares poorly with the previous performances, when the birds were all flighters, and fast forebye; but it illustrates the value of craftsmanship and of local knowledge. Mallards love fresh water. These nine were shot, one after another, by the aid of starlight, as they plumped down on the tiny trickle of a land-spring—the only *fresh* water, and the only *unfrozen* water that remained over many miles of saltings.

Prolonged frosts, with their concomitants of ice-fields, frozen flats, and feeding-grounds all congealed as hard as steel, are of invaluable assistance to the flight-gunner who knows his time and his place.



MERGANSERS.

CHAPTER III.

COAST-SHOOTING UNDER CANVAS.

(WITH THE SHOULDER-GUN.)

In confining my remarks to the use of open boats and the shoulder-gun only, leaving altogether out of consideration the subject of the specially-built fowling-yacht, I should explain that nearly all my experience at sea has been gained thus; nor have I ever met with opportunities for profitably employing the heavier artillery outside of harbour, excepting only the case of Brent geese referred to later. For the rest, though the game-ducks are regularly in the habit of resting by day on the open sea, it has always been quite outside my experience that, under these conditions, they will permit the approach of a sailing craft within shot, or, for that matter, within a quarter of a mile; and the result of my few experimental cruises with a big gun has confirmed me in that opinion. It has never been my good fortune, it is true, to own a fully-equipped fowling-yacht, such as those described by other writers, and in which, from their accounts, it is impossible to doubt that fair shots at mallard and wigeon are occasionally

obtainable at sea. Beyond all question, the extra speed and sea-going powers of such big craft must be taken into account; still, I conclude that really good shots are exceptional—snapped on chance occasions, as the intervals of a gale or by luckily catching the fowl in the semi-somnolent state that precedes bad weather. Such opportunities are very transient, and cannot be foretold; still, should the yachtsman-fowler have the fortune to fall in with them, and to recognise the fact in time—well, then he *may* do big things with the stanchion-gun at sea. Otherwise, I doubt his getting half-a-dozen fair shots in a winter—a poor return for the cost and trouble of keeping up so expensive an outfit. But I am open to conviction; each one's experience is limited, and I can only give my own. If that of others, on whose thorough practical knowledge one may rely, is different, I would willingly revise my views.

Putting on one side, therefore, for the present, the true game-ducks as absolutely inaccessible at sea, there remain the large groups of sea-ducks and diving-ducks, which well afford the sailing fowler excellent practice with the shoulder-gun, but which, in my opinion, are hardly suitable objects for the heavier artillery. The majority of species included in these groups, such as scaup and golden-eye, long-tailed and velvet ducks, are rarely met with except in small companies, ten or a dozen; while the scoters, which are found in black clouds, hardly

come under the definition of fair game, being absolutely uneatable; and to kill uselessly, goes against the etiquette of sport. It is true that several of the other sea-ducks come within the same category, but the numbers killed with the fowling-piece are small and may be overlooked, especially as these birds, in their infinite phases of plumage, are full of interest and new lessons to the naturalist.

Before going to sea, let me make one precautionary remark on boats. Remember that, once outside harbour, there is only the proverbial plank between you and eternity, and never, for the sake of any sporting ambition, trust yourself in an unseaworthy craft and without a practised crew. Avoid "pleasure boats" and summer sailors as you would a pestilence. As to the form of the boat, it is immaterial, for that varies infinitely all along the coast, and everywhere the local variety, provided it is well handled, will be found suitable to the work. Up in the north, the type is identical with modern Norsk models. In the Shetlands I have spent weeks cruising in craft that differ in no material way from the Viking ship at present preserved at Christiana; while along a great part of the north and east coasts the "coble" is the predominant form, and a more strangely designed craft does not exist. Griping the water for full three feet down with her sharp fore-foot, the after part flattens and

broadens out till the draught astern is but a few inches, so that the rudder perforce protrudes a yard beneath the triple keel. But she is a grand seaboat, the coble, with her much-raked mast and big brown lug; though the way she lies over in a breeze—forcing a wall of seething water above her lee gunwale—may well raise apprehensions of safety in the nervous and makes a novice say his prayers. There is one fatal objection to the coble as a fowling craft—she will not tack without lowering the sail, and shifting yard, sheets, and all the gear to the other side. True, she can make a short board with the sail aback against the mast; but that is, at best, a makeshift and slovenly work.

In shooting under canvas, the first consideration is seamanship—that is, the skilled handling of the boat. The elements of success lie in the helm and the hand that directs it. The skipper's first object is to gain and keep the weather-gauge of the fowl, while never going direct to windward. All wildfowl rise to the windward, and prefer to continue their flight in that direction, unless obstructed. Let us suppose we have descried a company of scaup-ducks at sea. The first question is, Will the boat from her present position fetch them to windward; that is, can she run down on them, keeping the fowl under her lee bow? If not, she must make a weather-board till the windward berth has been obtained. We are now running down on the birds

with a flowing sheet and plenty of room for a long sweep in the luff, when the fowl begin to rise. All this, of course, is a very old and well-known manœuvre, cutting out birds in the luff; but a few words to the young fowler are necessary at the actual moment of firing. While the fowl remain on the water, or if, after rising, they fly low, he can still keep them in view, beneath the jib; but the moment suspicion crosses their minds, or they find the boat has run in dangerously near, they "lift," and are at once lost to sight behind the head-sails. The boat's course has meanwhile been changed, and as she flies up into the wind all the angles are altered; should the fowler forget this, he may easily miss an excellent chance by letting the birds pass within easy shot overhead, while he keeps his eye low on the water, watching the line of their former flight. That is one mistake. But suppose the fowl hold their course and pass straight ahead—Stop! you are never going to fire now? Those birds are 200 yards off, though perhaps you will not believe me! This is another mistake, far commoner than the last; though few will credit it till they have wasted many cartridges, lost all faith in their erewhiles trusted weapons, and even in their wonted skill of hand and eye. Nothing is more deceptive than distance at sea; amidst open water and sky, there is no guide or mark to assist the eye, and seamen, as a rule, only accentuate the difficulty,

and are ready to swear (some of them) that the shot was a perfectly fair one, though they know that the distance was 150 yards. They will even pretend to comfort sinking spirits after a "miss" at double that distance, by declaring that one or more birds have gone away "hard hit." Now I recommend my pupil never to trust a boatman, or ask his opinion in regard to distance; let him learn that for himself by practice, always remembering that fowl are generally double, or treble the distance they appear to be, and that when actually within fair shot of the shoulder-gun, they seem to be almost aboard you.

The next point I would fain impress is that the speed of wildfowl, no less than their apparent distance, is deceptive to the unpractised eye. Geese, in particular, but all the diving ducks in less degree, appear to travel slow, whereas not one, but all of them, have the speed of game-birds; or, at any rate, unless the fowler acts on that assumption, he will suffer many a disappointment.

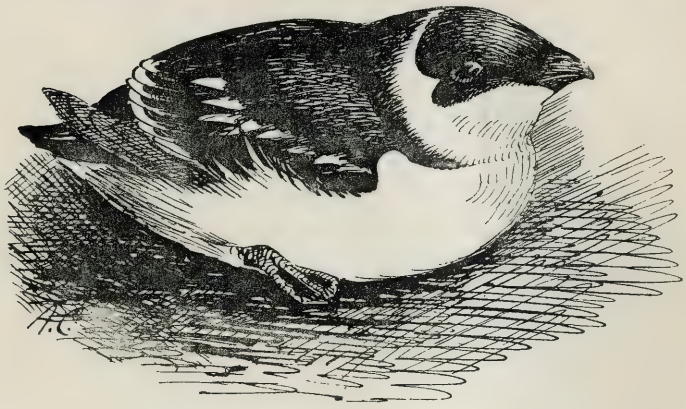
One last instruction, though perhaps it is unnecessary:—All arrangements must be made, and a complete understanding exist on board, *before approaching* fowl. After that, leave everything to the helmsman. There must be no talking, no peering around sails, no signals or movements of crew, gun, or gunner. Everyone must sit low, silent, and rigid, till the final "Up and at 'em."

Well, we will return to the moment when we were attempting to "cut out" those scaups. They have risen, and still find the boat too near their course; they "lift" to give her a wider berth, and, as they come round her jib, much resemble a pack of high-sailing blackgame or the rearguard of a long string of driven grouse which, perceiving the "reek" in their front, are rising to clear the batteries. Their momentum forbids a sudden change of course, but they can "lift" and swerve off in curving lines. To drive home our simile, here come four velvet ducks right across our bows, looking for all the world like four old blackcocks, with their thick, stiff necks, dark plumage, and white wing-bars. Now, if they *were* blackcocks, you would know how to deal with them; but these are wild duck at sea, and I implore you to remember that the forward allowance must be doubled or trebled. Bear in mind that the distance is far beyond what you would dream of firing at game; moreover, the ducks are lifting fast, and you can hardly shoot too high or too far forward. Well done! The shot was taken smartly, exactly as directed; with the result that two heavy drakes collapse almost simultaneously. Note that both are struck well forward, in head and neck, and both float stone-dead, though they are tough as leather, and the pair scale 7lb. If hit behind, though riddled with shot, they would not have fallen; while, if wing-broken, they are rather less easy to catch than a seal.

But enough of theory and of prosing preachments over the after-breakfast pipe. The flood-tide is running and it is time we got to sea. With a fine off-shore breeze the little harbour is left astern; and, as his smart craft cuts her way through the seas and the sprays curl crisply beneath her bows, then the sporting spirit of the young fowler will be stirred to its core, as on every side he sees, on wing or wave, new bird-forms that he has never seen before, nor his philosophy ever dreamt of. But his fingers will tingle to touch them. What they are he knows not —their varied forms entrance his sense of sight; and truly no more shapely types exist. Some weird of appearance, as the grebes and loons; others trim and smart, but all full of life and character, beautiful and specialised, each to its own assigned mode of life. What are they? Our young friend will know them all in time, when he has followed them, studied them, and familiarised himself with their varied forms and appearances—say in a year or two; but not before, albeit I could now undertake to give him, in a couple of columns, as plainly as written words can import, every detail of the leading characters and distinguishing features of each. Read, please, what I have to say, and digest it if you will; but believe me you can never be truly introduced to sea-game on paper, nor learn nature's lessons from printed precepts. In after days, when experience has been gained by practice, you will recognise the truth of

these rude "first lessons," and perhaps be grateful for hints conveyed, and the outlines of facts gleaned, it may be, at the cost of many a hardship and risk, many a bungle, blank day, and bitter disappointment.

We sail close past spick-and-span guillemots and razor-bills, the street-sparrows of the coast, some soundly sleeping on the rolling waves. You will not disturb these—save under the penalty of skinning



LITTLE AUK.

and dissecting each bird shot! Yonder swims a little auk; last week's gale has driven him inshore, for his winter home is mid-ocean, and when you see him in soundings it is not well with him—you can sometimes pick him up by hand, as happened to the little fellow whose portrait (from the life) is here annexed. We must seek more desirable fowl. That dusky cloud, low on the horizon like the smoke

of a passing steamer, is a big pack of scoters; there are other flights to the eastward, and here, right ahead, sit full two hundred afloat. They are easily recognised by their black plumage, without a single white feather.

On first arrival, in November, many of these ducks are quite tame, and may be shot as easily as guillemots, especially the young, which are then in curious piebald plumage, dirty white beneath and on throat and cheeks. The "middle-aged" (one or two years), some of which have summered here, are dull, dusky brown (resembling adult females), but by February the drakes have begun to assume the glossy black feathers, which come in patches. The scoters you will find wild enough now; but to-day the spanking breeze will perhaps enable us to "cut them out," and secure a few specimens. That is all one need wish, since these ducks are rank of flavour and quite uneatable.

More important fowl are the scaup and golden-eye, both arriving in October. To find the latter at sea, steer a course towards the points where long rock-scars project, like Trinacris, far from land, producing at half-tide a shelving, shingly bottom in, say, two fathoms. At such spots, and about the tideways of an outer bar, small companies of golden-eyes will be found busily diving, and will at times admit of approach. The different degrees of wildness observable in this one species, under different conditions,

are worth passing note. Here, at sea, they may often be shot from a sailing boat, and inland, on the moorland lochs (where golden-eyes are the commonest migratory duck), they are so simple that to see them is usually synonymous with securing them; whereas, on the other hand, when found on the tidal oozes and channels of the harbours, they are absolutely inaccessible, and only in rare and exceptional cases fall to the lot of the punt-gunner. Scaup, again, may be described as comparatively tame under all circumstances. On the open sea, when in pursuit of better game, I have sailed past within fifty yards of them, and, partly owing to their predilection for narrow bays or creeks along the coast, they are often easy of access. Right under our lee, at the head of such a creek, we descry a company of a dozen, their species at once recognisable by the plumage of the single old drake, who appears almost white amidst his duskier companions — a pretty spectacle as they cruise unsuspicious round their rock-girt creek. Now put the helm down, and run into that creek. Even if the scaup should rise wide, they *must* come out past the boat to windward, and, by reserving some power in the luff, you will then have them across your bows, within easy shot. But bear in mind that scaup, with all sea-ducks are intensely tough; and, even should no bird show signs of being hit, it is always worth while watching their flight as far as

SCAUP DUCKS.

possible. Without this precaution, many a fairly-struck bird will be lost, falling dead on the sea, perhaps within 200 yards. The bulk of the scaups met with in October and November are in the brown plumage of the female, showing the white forehead; many of these, however, are young drakes, and those of a year old will, during the winter, acquire greyish mantles and black heads. By January the white forehead will have disappeared, though these two- or three-year-old males never attain the perfect beauty of the adult drake with his bottle-green head, pearly grey back, and clean-cut velvet waistcoat. Another beautiful species met with by the sailing gunner is the long-tailed duck, which arrives about November 10th, and whose haunt is the open sea. This is rather a local species: not at all uncommon in parts of Scotland and the north-east coast, but almost unknown in the south and west; we have, however, shot them on the Wash and off the coast of Norfolk. On first coming, they are sometimes found quite easy of access, but in mid-winter are wild enough. There are no special directions which can be applied in the pursuit either of these ducks at sea, or of the eiders or velvet ducks, beyond the instructions already sufficiently impressed, viz., to sit low, judge distance carefully, and hold well ahead. These birds, one and all, are so strong muscularly, and so coated with impervious down inside the feathers, that no ordinary shot, striking them behind, will penetrate, or do

them any visible damage. Nor does a broken wing afford the fowler the very remotest chance of securing his victim, for so adept at diving are all sea-ducks, so capable of flying under water, and of holding the body immersed with only the beak above the surface, that it is highly improbable that he will recover a single cripple, though he may have half a dozen winged birds all round the boat.

In dead-calm water, when the re-appearance of the smallest object can at once be detected, even strong divers may be secured—tired out and practically "drowned"—by a profuse expenditure of pop-gun cartridges; but for this the sea must be of mirror-like quiescence.

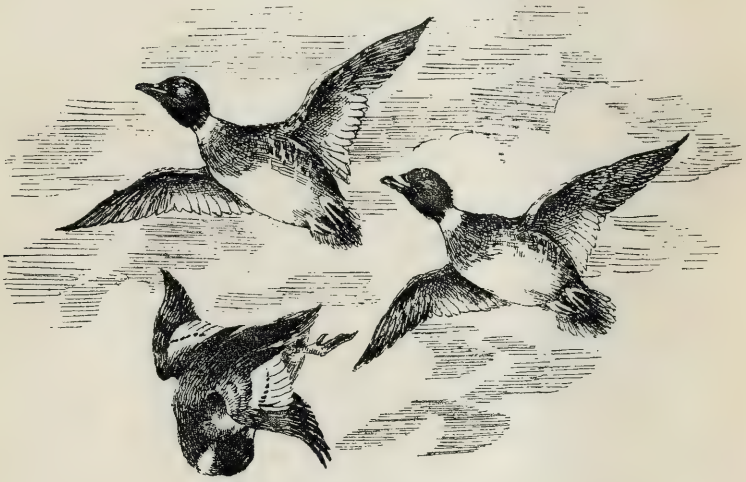
These six species (scaup and golden-eye, long-tailed duck, eider, scoter, and velvet duck) are those which, taking one locality with another, the fowler may expect regularly to meet with (and to shoot) at sea. There are others, such as pochard, tufted duck, &c., whose appearance is more casual; but he is also sure to see (but not to shoot) mallards, wigeon, sheld-duck, and possibly others, depending on season and locality.

Now let me revert to the Brent geese. Those sharp-witted fowl, as a general rule, spend the day inside the harbour, feeding on the flats and shallows, where they are far beyond the reach of our sea-going craft. But they exhibit some curious variations of habit. Thus, when the first stragglers began to

arrive, a mere vanguard of the main armies, about November, these geese frequently elect to live at sea, depending for their food on surface-floatage and on the drift weed which each ebb carries out to them. This is, of course, a precarious method of dining, and is hardly available except when their numbers are small; and here I may remark, in passing, that even on first arrival these geese are thoroughly up to every trick of the fowler's trade. They have had their "first lessons"—aye, and second, too—from our friends beyond the sea, in Denmark and Holland. Again, it sometimes happens that the Brents, even in mid-winter and when in full force, are driven to this resource of sea-living by the sheer ill-usage and persecution to which they are subjected by the enormous modern swivels. It seems perhaps rather hard lines to attack them at sea under such conditions; but there can be no doubt that they do then offer an opportunity for the employment of the stanchion-gun, for geese are rather less fearful than ducks of a sail; indeed, on occasions, when the wind has been blowing half a gale, I have seen excellent shots obtained at them with shoulder-gun from the fore-deck of a 5-tonner. Thus it will be seen that Brent geese may occasionally be included, along with the ducks and other fowl already named, among the possible spoils of the sailing gunner.

And now my space is running short, while many topics remain untouched. I intended, for instance,

to have written of guns, gear, and charges; and there yet remains unmentioned an almost infinite variety of interesting objects and creatures that will come under the notice of the naturalist-fowler at sea. There are the grebes and big sea-divers, the puffins, tysties, and shearwaters, to say nothing of the seals, porpoises, and strange cetaceans, with other forms of pelagic life. But space forbids. There would remain no room in this book for anything else.



GOLDEN-EYES—A CLEAN KILL.

CHAPTER IV.

ON PUNTS, PUNT-GUNS, AND THE PRACTICE OF WILDFOWL-SHOOTING AFLOAT.

NOW we come to the more important branches of the wildfowler's art—at least they are generally regarded as such—the question of punts and punt-guns, with their various types and methods of employment. It is customary to commence the discussion with a learned dissertation on the different builds of boats and weapons, embracing minute details of measurements, construction, and so on. Shall I follow the custom, and once more tackle the whole trite subject? I think not, and here are my reasons:—First, I believe that everything that can profitably be said has been said, and said much better than I can re-say it; for, from Hawker to the "Badminton," every book on wildfowling contains such information in elaborate detail. Secondly, I admit that these mechanical matters have never possessed for me any great attraction. One acquires a genuine affection for one's beautiful guns, and rods, and rifles; they are real objects of beauty, and one's tried companions in some of the

happiest days of life. But it is less easy to cultivate a true and living friendship with a punt-gun—much as one loves its company. It is so ponderous, and withal such a shapeless, inanimate object, that, at quite a short distance, one might, on a chance meeting, mistake one's own old and much-loved friend for a painted pole or a downcomer rain-spout.

For my two smart gun-boats, however, my affection is unbounded and sincere. I have tried to sketch them and their trim lines from every point of view; but never in my life had it occurred to me to measure them, till recently, for the purposes of this work. I annex a list of general dimensions of double and single-handed punts, taken from some of the most successful fowling craft in my knowledge; but I do not think that further details, relating to the boat-builder's business and so forth, are a necessary part of a young fowler's instruction —not, at any rate, in "first lessons."

Below I give the measurements of two punts that have served me well for years :—

1. BOANERGES, double-handed fowling-punt, designed to carry two men, and a gun of 80lb. to 100lb.

	ft.	in.
Length over all	21	2
,, along keel	19	10
,, of fore-deck	7	0
,, of after-deck	3	4
Breadth amidships, across deck	3	6½
,, ,, on floor	2	8½
,, between coamings (extreme)	2	7
Depth, gun-beam to bottom-boards	0	8
,, of wash-streaks, forward	0	3½
,, ,, ,, aft	0	2½

2. BOADICEA, double-handed fowling punt, to carry a gun of 120lb. or more.

	ft.	in.
Length over all	22	0
,, of keel	20	10
,, of fore-deck	7	10
,, of after-deck	4	2
Breadth amidships, across deck	3	9
,, on floor	3	1
,, between coamings (extreme)	2	8½
Depth, gun-beam to floor	0	8½
,, of wash-streaks ..... same as last.		

Both these boats are propelled either by sculls or setting-pole, and each is fitted with mast and sail (set on a sprit), enabling them to run at splendid speed before the wind, or, by using the centre-boards, to sail, with very little leeway, with the wind well abeam. The centre-boards (sheets of galvanised metal, which will also, on occasion, serve as an anchor) are fitted fore and aft in solid cases, one immediately forward of the gun-beam and beneath the gun when in position, the other in the after-deck. They are never in the way, and often of invaluable service. Thus, when the day's sport (or night's) ends, as it often does, four, six, or even ten miles from home, what a blessed comfort it is to be able to order "out centre-boards, up sprit," and then lie smoking in the stern-sheets all the way, instead of having to scull for hours, or pole like a bargee. Steering-power is supplied by an oar over the lee quarter. A rudder, necessarily projecting below the boat's bottom, would, I imagine, be carried away about twice a day. Needless to say, when centre-

boards are down, great care is required in navigating shallows or tidal banks. The result of their touching the ground when the craft is fully under way, would be a severe strain to their casings, and, indeed, to the whole frame of the punt.

These double-handed boats, it is almost unnecessary to remark, *cannot* be paddled. Their breadth (forty-two inches and upwards) precludes that method of propulsion.

Here I add the measurement of a first-rate single-handed craft that has oft returned to port with a handsome freight of mallards, wigeon, or wild geese:

	ft.	in.
Length over all	16	7
,, along keel	15	7
,, of fore-deck	6	2½
,, of after deck	1	11
Breadth amidships, across deck	3	2
,, ,, on floor	2	2
,, between coamings (extreme)	2	1
Depth, gun-beam to bottom boards	0	9¼
,, of wash-streaks, forward	0	4½
,, ,, aft	0	2½

Carrying a gun of (about) 90lb. Propelled either by sculls, paddles, or setting-pole.

Lastly, by way of comparison, are annexed the chief measurements of a single-handed punt of the narrower type that is used on the Wash—taken from the craft hereinafter mentioned:

Single-handed punt designed for working with paddles. The gunner lies resting his chest on a padded box (which serves also to hold ammunition),

having one arm reached out over either side of the boat. The paddles are feathered under water, and dropped (being attached by cords) when a shot is about to be taken.

	ft.	in.
Length over all	18	6
,, along keel	17	8
,, of fore-deck	7	6
,, of after-deck	3	9
Breadth amidships, across deck	2	9
,, ,, on floor	2	4
,, between coamings (extreme)	1	10
Depth, gun-beam to floor	1	0½

Note on "paddling."—Remember that no ordinary human being—none, that is, save professional fowler, fisherman, or similar pachyderm—can endure, for a single half-hour, the cold of constant immersion in salt water often almost at the freezing point.

Having now given the varying dimensions of fowling-craft, I may relate an incident showing how fallacious mere figures are for constructive purposes, *unless* in the hands of a practical boat-builder well versed in this particular branch of the business. A friend recently ordered a double-punt, to be built precisely on the lines laid down in the "Badminton Library," yet has found her in practice absolutely useless; since the "spring" fore-and-aft (though nominally to scale) is such that the boat's bows do not "bear." Hence the constant clatter of the water—flop, flop! under the fore-foot—creates such a disturbance that one might as well attempt to go to

fowl with a brass band playing "Tara-ra-boom-de-ay" on the quarter-deck.

Coming now to the question of single or double-handed punts, it hardly seems to me that there is room for a question in it—at any rate for the young fowler, to whom alone these remarks are addressed; since, unless he has either been born and bred a boatman, or has served years of apprenticeship (when he will need no hints from me), he could no more handle a single-handed punt than he could drive, untaught, a four-in-hand down Piccadilly, or neatly cast a salmon fly, say, thirty yards. I remember when this discussion raged, some years ago, that an advocate of the single boats compared the use of the double to riding a led horse—which, I think he told us, was the fashion in Japan. In those days I daresay we thought very little of the Japs, even if we gave them a thought at all; but latterly they have shown us that—whether they can ride or not—at least they can shoot and hit, and hit hard too; and perhaps the double-handed punter can also at times score a good shot. The broader, more sea-worthy, double punts, drawing less water, are now, indeed, in many places—especially on wide, exposed waters—admitted to be the most effective fowling craft. To work a single punt a man must be a practised waterman, otherwise he is running a perfectly reckless and foolhardy risk in going to sea alone; but to argue that because a man is not a

"WILL SHE WEATHER IT?"

SIX MILES TO LEEWARD—WIND, TIDE, AND ICE AGAINST US.

waterman, therefore he cannot be a fowler, is illogical. Of course, if the fowler happens to be a genuine lover of boats and boat-work, so much the better; and in any case it is most desirable that the beginner should use every endeavour to acquire a thorough knowledge of the art of handling his craft in the tideways, whether with oars, paddles, setting-pole, or under sail. By the time he has become adept in these matters, he will be able to decide for himself whether he continues his career in a double or a single craft. But, for the present, we will assume that he serves his apprenticeship double-handed, with a professional fowler as shipmate, instead of essaying plural offices and singing,

> For I'm the crew and the captain too, and the cook of the *Nancy* brig,
> The midshipmite and the bo'sun tight, and the crew of the captain's gig.

Well, putting aside all argument upon the respective merits and advantages of one style of boat or another, there is a very interesting problem underlying the whole subject. What is the principle, the rationale, by which it is possible that a punt of any form whatever can approach wildfowl on open water? "They do not see it," may, perhaps, be remarked; but that is nonsense. Just lie down flat on the sand at water-level, so as to bring your eye as nearly as may be to a wild duck's point of view, and then let a punt be carefully "set in" towards you.

There can be no mistake about your seeing her, whether she be of the broad and low type or the high and narrow. True, with her shapely lines, low freeboard, and rounded decks, she looms less than one might expect from her bulk; still a single pair of eyes see her plain enough at 100 yards—how is it possible for her to approach 1000 pairs? "Because the fowl mistake the punt for a larger boat at a greater distance," it may be suggested. That is certainly true sometimes, especially when running down on fowl in a punt under sail, or in places where they have not been used to a sailing punt. But it cannot apply to the other case, unless we credit the birds with very defective sight, and worse powers of distance-judgment than we possess ourselves. A fowler can estimate his range within a very small percentage, as his craft draws in to the deadly distances.

No; neither of these answers will meet the case; for I know of waters where ducks, though they had never seen a gunning-punt before, would not permit its approach, or indeed its presence, within half a mile. This was in foreign parts, and caused us great disappointment, after all the trouble of taking a punt abroad, as is related in our book "Wild Spain" (p. 395 *et seq.*). There, one would naturally have supposed the fowl would be (the turn, at any rate) less sophisticated than at home; whereas, as a matter of fact, we can there secure five or six times

as many duck with the shoulder-gun as with the stancheon. And yet on our heavily harassed and hard-shot harbours at home, I have on several occasions punted to within the short distance of fifty yards of mallards and (less often) of geese in broad daylight and on open water. Now, this is an enigma; premising two things, which may be accepted, viz.: first, that wildfowl are ceaselessly vigilant; and, second, that their eye-power is quite equal to detecting a punt, end-on, at 1000 yards.

Beyond a doubt, the extent to which wildfowl are accustomed to see boats and small craft passing in their vicinity bears on the point. This consideration applies in Spain: but, curiously, not in Egypt and the Lower Nile, though the conditions are similar. Again, during severe frosts, or for short periods preceding or following prolonged gales of wind, the vigilance of wildfowl is relaxed; but such occasions are, of course, exceptional. Probably the true answer is that it is the rapid approach of the punt without (to the birds' eyes) any visible means of propulsion, that renders the deceit effective. The deadly distance is gained ere they realise that that low, white object on the distant water is not stationary.

Beyond a doubt the question of the boats is largely a question of locality, different waters requiring different types of craft. On broad exposed estuaries the big double punts, being more seaworthy, are to be preferred; though on the Wash, which is

broad enough, an opposite type prevails. I remember about ten years ago seeing one of these craft for the first time. A South Lincolnshire professional had brought it by rail some hundreds of miles, hoping to better his lot in a more northern latitude. I well remember being struck with the deep narrow craft, as he came alongside of me one morning at day-break, and we compared the two punts as they lay together. His sat on the water like a duck, buoyant and high; mine, on the other hand, rather resembled a great northern diver at the moment when he suspects that a passing boat is paying him undue attention; there is nothing of him out of water but his broad, flush back, and the seas meet, as it were, behind his neck. The Southron had great confidence in the superiority of his craft, and relied on making a living in her during the winter in competition with the local hands. He was an excellent fowler and naturalist, having an unusually accurate knowledge of birds, and he worked day and night. Yet the last time I met him, at the end of February, he offered to sell me his boat, gun and gear for (I think it was) 50*s*. Poor fellow, I was truly sorry for him, since the only result of his enterprise and hard work was that he had not a coin left to pay his bills and his ticket back to Boston.

I tried this boat, but found her so crank and unsteady in her bearings, that I concluded a very early start would be necessary in order to properly

handle such a craft. Clearly this type of punt, though successful in the south, was not adapted for northern waters. Though broader in the beam, the larger, double punts float lower, draw less water, and are less conspicuous at a distance than the narrow, high-sided, paddling punts. It may, I think, be taken in a general way that the double-handed boats are the favourites with amateurs, who mostly leave the singles to professionals. I revert to the subject and amplify these remarks in a subsequent chapter (XII.).

Turning now to punt-guns, I must first remark that both my present weapons are muzzle-loaders. Do not smile, please, or think me immeasurably behind the times. I am not recommending them; but muzzle-loaders are yet in very general use along the coast, and for punt-work not so far behindhand, for shots afloat are few and far between. Wildfowl do not stream overhead like pheasants or grouse. Three or four shots make a big day, and reloading occupies, after all, but five minutes. The real points of advantage in the breech-loading punt-gun are two, viz.: (1) Facility for rapidly changing shot, small for large, or *vice versâ*, and (2) their lesser liability to missfire. A missfire is the *bête noire*, the most dreaded catastrophe of the punter; it may make the difference of a totally blank day or night, or twenty beautiful birds at a shot. I have had my full share of missfires, and well know the sickening sensation they cause; but with care such risks are

reducible to a minimum, even with the M.-L. Follow these rules, and you will not have two missfires in two seasons. Unload every night; after each shot wipe out and thoroughly dry the chamber; after charging with powder, hold the gun vertically and tap the butt gently on a stone or on the bottom-boards till all is settled down in the chamber; prime amply, but not unduly (which tends to choke the nipple), using a hard-wood funnel and copper pricker; then, after fixing the cap, tie a stout waterproof cover over the breech, which protects cap and priming from rain or spray till fowl are sighted.

To change the shot may seem troublesome; but, after all, the necessity may not arise half a dozen times in a season; and the operation can be accomplished in four minutes when afloat—less, should there be a bank at hand to lay the boat aground. Before drawing the shot, the young fowler must on no account (such as an imagined necessity for haste) omit first to remove the cap, replacing it with a wad of dry tow and lowering the hammer; afterwards making sure that the priming is well up before re-capping.

Another notable advantage of the B.-L. system is that the fowler can thereby use a much bigger and more powerful weapon in the same craft. Thus Mr. T. M. Pike writes that he now uses a B.-L. gun of 140lb. (9ft. barrel, $1\frac{3}{4}$in. bore) in a single-handed punt which formerly carried an M.-L. gun of only 100lb.,

8ft. barrel, 1½in. bore. But although muzzle-loaders have served me well, I would most assuredly recommend the use of a breech-loader in preference, especially in cases where a first cost of, say, fifty or sixty guineas is not an obstacle. The earlier B.-L. punt-guns were experimental, and many of them far from satisfactory; but the mechanism of these weapons has slowly approached perfection; and the beautiful guns now turned out by leading makers leave little to desire. Had I the last twenty years to spend again, I think this would be my first investment.

Putting monetary considerations on one side, London is undoubtedly the best place to go to for punt-guns—as for several other things of greater or less importance. The prices charged by the first-class makers seem high, but one can always rely on both material and workmanship as of the best obtainable, and these qualities ensure durability and unfailing service at sea. This, in remote parts where no gunsmith is available, and where a break-down of any working part may involve a total loss of sport, is an important consideration. One likes to believe, and I do believe, that one gets "value received" for the extra initial outlay. The number of firms which stand out prominent in this special branch of gun-making is limited, and if I must make a choice, I would name Messrs. Holland and Holland as holding perhaps the premier place, because they have devoted great attention and undoubtedly had

great success in the building of large guns. I hate advertisements, and should this appear a "puff," it is at least a disinterested one, since the only punt-gun transaction I have personally had with the firm named proved unsatisfactory. But that was some years ago—in the "experimental age"—and has in no way shaken my faith in their ascendancy in this branch of their art, were I now about to purchase a modern breech-loading punt-gun. It is fair to add that, in my knowledge, Messrs. J. and W. Tolley have also turned out punt-guns that are doing good service afloat; and there are other London and provincial makers to whose work the same remark would doubtless apply, though their guns do not happen to have come under my notice.

For relative cheapness, however, we must go to Birmingham, where very workmanlike weapons, that have given excellent results at sea, are turned out at about one-third less than London prices. The "finish" is rougher, though that is of less importance, and on the vital point of durability I do not feel qualified to speak. The question of the best sizes of punt-guns I must defer to another chapter.

CHAPTER V.

ON PUNTS, PUNT-GUNS, AND THE PRACTICE OF WILDFOWL-SHOOTING AFLOAT (*continued*).

NOTHING so far has been said as to the best sizes of punt-guns. This, of course, depends, in the first instance, on the nature of the service required of them; but the question has also a broader bearing, as I will presently show. Punt-guns vary from small weapons of 50lb. or 60lb., with a shot-charge of 8oz. or 9oz., up to the latest developments in double monsters that scale several hundredweights, require three or four men to carry them on board, and throw 3lb. of shot.

In selecting a gun, the middle course is safest; and for the great bulk of coast-shooting on British waters the most useful size, and that generally employed, is a gun of about 80lb. to 100lb. in weight, with a shot-charge of about 16oz., more or less. Such a weapon is quite capable of knocking down more than a score of geese at a shot, should the rare opportunity to do so occur (but such chances grow every year less likely), while the fowler would not hesitate to fire her at small com-

panies of fowl—say even as few as half-a-dozen, if sitting nicely together. Of course, special conditions may exist rendering the employment of a heavier weapon desirable; and, on the other hand, on small waters, or where fowl are few and scattered, a gun of, say, 6olb. will give the best results.

One primary point I would especially urge on the young fowler, both in selecting his gun and using it afterwards:—He should not be induced by books or gunmakers to believe that guns shoot stronger or further by virtue of their being bigger. Now *primâ facie*, the advice appears anomalous; and, if laid down as an axiom, I would myself undertake to demolish it, since a 10-bore *does* shoot further than a 20-bore, while the force and driving power of *all* punt-guns immeasurably exceeds that of the best shoulder-guns ever built, just as a 4in. field piece surpasses in power a ·500 Express rifle, or a crack P. and O. liner steams past a screw-hopper or a collier brig. The advice, I admit, involves a hypothesis that it is not true in fact, though it may be in degree, while in practice it is eminently wholesome. I undertake to sav that my pupil, should he act on it, will one day be grateful, since it will have saved him the cost of two or three useless weapons, besides the labour of proving them to be so.

What is the first thing a tyro invariably does when infected with the fever of fowling? He rushes off to buy some unwieldy weapon, long in the chambers,

extra-full choke, rubber-padded, and the rest—all under the totally false presumption that wildfowling is wholly a matter of making brilliant shots at 100 yards, or, I dare say, even more. It is nothing of the sort. Shots afloat are longer, it is true, than ashore, and very long shots are sometimes necessary, and occasionally successful. But let me emphatically assert that the true art of wildfowling consists (or should consist) in getting *well up* to your birds; and, you may depend upon it, the secret of success in this, as in every other form of sport with gun or rifle, is close quarters.

Now let us compare the comparative powers of large and small guns respectively. The smallest swivel-guns made (say about 6olb.) will drive BB shot in such style as to sweep the water at 80 to 100 yards with a force that will kill every duck within their spread that happens to be fairly hit. Is not that enough? But, as an illustration of a *long* shot, I have, with just such a gun and 100z. BB shot, knocked down six, and bagged five geese out of a company of under fifty, sitting high and dry, at 153 measured yards. It was close on dusk and ebb-tide, which left no alternative but to risk a long shot. Well, if a small gun will do that, it is enough, at least as regards driving power. You need no more, for you have no business to fire longer shots. It is the long shots—the reckless, random firing of the present day—that threaten the ruin of sport on the coast,

and of sportsmanship in the modern fowler. If, in grouse-driving, a man were to take out a full-choked 8-bore loaded with BB., he might drop grouse by "browning" the packs two butts away. But such a proceeding would be a breach of all the laws of sport and of fairplay, and would not be tolerated on the moors or among sportsmen for a moment. That is not sport. But its counterpart passes for sport on the coast at the present day, and that, too, among men who should have set a better example.

Now, I have shown that the smaller guns will throw their *shot* effectively, if not quite so far as the big ones, at any rate as far as any fair sporting range. The big guns have certainly some advantage in the matter of range, and their shot-charge and "spread" are, of course, largely increased, doing proportionately greater execution when fired at large companies of fowl. It is a fair rule to proportion the size of the gun to the numbers of the birds usually fired at. So far, I have specially spoken of *shot*, and emphasised BB. I do so advisedly, for on the coast, *shot* is no longer of any avail. We have already got to bullets, and will probably soon be educated up to shrapnel, if not shell. What is the use of the "Badminton" volume teaching that "seventy yards is a good shot, but sixty is better," while some of the chief exponents of the art of up-to-date fowling falsify in practice its doctrinaire theories on the lines above described?

As BB stands to grouse, so slugs and pistol-bullets stand—or should stand—to wildfowl. That is my text. Now for the sermon. Let me first distinctly declare that I have no quarrel with big guns—as big as you like—simply as such. The size of guns should be proportioned to local requirements and the quantities of fowl aggregated, with other considerations. It is their abuse (not their use) that I deplore; and, unfortunately, these huge guns do lend themselves to abuse precisely through that quality of theirs of throwing an immense bulk of bullets. Only those who know the power of punt-guns will credit the distances at which—when loaded *with bullets*—they are sporadically effective. But it is merely the momentum of a heavy projectile, not any skill on the fowler's part, that is evoked. Large "mould shot" will, simply from its weight, and after the original force is almost exhausted, and the shot is "spent" and falling, deal a blow that will disable a goose, should it chance to strike a vulnerable spot—say head, neck, or point of wing—at amazing, well-nigh incredible distances—certainly 300 and probably 400 yards. But if this fact can be legitimately utilised for sporting purposes, what is the result? That, instead of endeavouring to outmanœuvre the fowl, and by his own skill and craft, to secure a good shot or two at close quarters, the modern puntsman cruises about with the intention of firing a hatful of pistol bullets a dozen times

a day whenever the persecuted geese swim or fly within any distance less than a quarter-mile. And this on the off-chance that a single goose, or perhaps two, may fall wing-tipped or stunned by one spent pellet out of the two or three pounds discharged.

Now I urge, and have before urged in the *Field*, that this practice is a subversion of sport—nay, more, since it offends those primary rules of fair-play that underlie all sport. The laws of sport are a *lex non scripta;* but their principles are understood alike by peer and peasant, by boatman or baronet. Before all else, they include fairplay and "law" to every bird or beast of chase, and even to vermin. Fairplay is assured to partridge or grouse; why should it be denied to the wild goose? He, on his side, is a truly sporting bird, and always plays the game according to the rules. He, more than any other wildfowl—far more than all the duck-tribe—contributes to the pleasure and sport of the coast-gunners. For his diurnal habits, his presence in thousands on mud-flat and shallow from morning till night, his beauty of form and flight, the glorious music of his big battalions, his edible excellence—aye, and his very wildness and defiance of man—are each and all separate reasons why we should honour him, and extend to him the utmost consideration. Instead of that he is pelted with pistol balls on every occasion. Shoot him by all means, secure him by every art and stratagem that man can devise for his

"GOING." (WILD GEESE.)

capture, provided always those arts come fairly within the rules and the definitions of sport. All I appeal for is fairplay, and that, I know, he does not get; and this, be it added, arises from no fault of the fisherman-fowler or poor professional, but from the well-to-do amateur, who tours down to the coast, and boasts on his return of having bagged a dozen geese, though he omits to mention that even that paltry return was the result of firing away perhaps a hundredweight of bullets.

Now I have had my say, and will quit criticism and steer a course for smoother water. But where are we to find that blissful haven of rest where wildfowl do greatly abound, and where no rivalries reign nor jealousies vex the soul? Not, I fear, in British waters—not, that is, this side of the millennium, and even that epoch offers scant promise to punt-gunners, who, being necessarily, like great poets, in a shocking minority, will go for nothing in an age when only majorities count; even if, long before, parish councils shall not have "allotted" the outmost oozes and vainly planted ague-stricken starvelings where only a wigeon or wild goose could flourish and grow fat. But I have not undertaken to touch on the question of localities, and will, therefore, only add that, had I the last twenty winters to spend again, I would give the preference to foreign lands so far as wildfowl are concerned.

The fowler has there altogether a better chance.

There are, even on the nearer continental coasts, magnificent expanses of tidal marsh and saltings where geese and duck may be seen in thousands, and where the natives have not yet progressed beyond such primitive methods as pits and sunken casks, wherein the patient gunner spends days on the chance of fowl floating, flying, or swimming within range. More than this, there are, abroad, infinitely greater possibilities of falling in with new facts in ornithology and interesting species that one hardly now expects on the over-shot harbours at home where, if one gets a shot at all, its objective is always pretty much the same, and can be foretold with tolerable certainty.

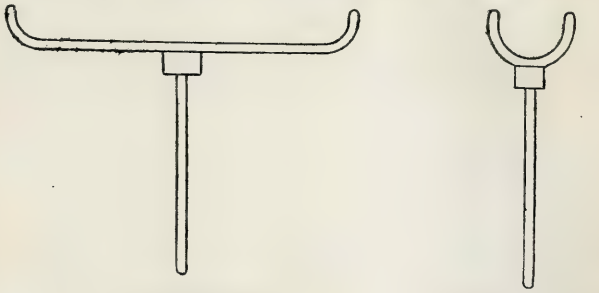
There is to me, I admit, a charm in this exploration of new and unknown spots, and in the enterprise which it invokes. Slight that may be, in days of cheap and rapid travel: still, it is a beginning and a first step out of the beaten track.

Years ago, when the competition at home was less keen, and a gunner sometimes enjoyed the luxury of a small harbour all to himself, I shared a large estuary with three others, all professionals. Each man, when all four were out, kept to certain tacitly-recognised bounds of water, thus assuring to each a fair chance of sport, while minimising the labour of perpetual poling. One of these three men deserves a passing record. He all but lived on the oozes, passing day and night in a cockleshell canoe, some

12ft. in length by 24in. beam. His armament was a rusty 10-bore, and his reliance was on close quarters. To secure these, he was ever laboriously digging channels through the ooze, some of them hundreds of yards in length, whereby he was enabled to reach the midst of the feeding-grounds. He further facilitated approach by raising ramparts of stones (brought for miles in his boat), or, where the mud was very soft, by driving in piles, on which the drift weed accumulated and masked his advance. All this involved bitterly cold and dirty work—regular mud-larking; but his success, considering his puny weapon, was at times phenomenal. On one occasion I witnessed a wonderful shot. The geese were all a-guzzle in the midst of a green ooze, when, from one of his long "cuts," there uprose this Pyrrhic fowler, apparently in the very thickest part of the fowl. I helped him to gather his cripples and "droppers," and then counted on board his boat no less than seventeen geese, the result of this one shot with a double 10-bore. He told me that when he fired, the nearest birds were "not passing ten yards from the muzzle."

THE RECOIL of punt guns, burning from two to four ounces of powder, or upwards, is very great, and effective means for taking up this recoil are of the first importance—not only in respect of the correct delivery of the shot, but to the safety (and indeed the life) of the gunner, who lies immediately behind

the stock. The most efficient recoil-apparatus is still, undoubtedly, Col. Hawker's beautiful device of a spiral spring working in a slot fixed beneath the barrel. This, however, should always be supplemented (in view of possible failure) by a rope-breeching. In guns not fitted with recoil-spring, the rope alone will serve the purpose, being carried from the trunnions of the gun around the stem of the punt and rove through a hole or notch cut there for its reception. Rope-breechings should always be



The right sort. The wrong sort.

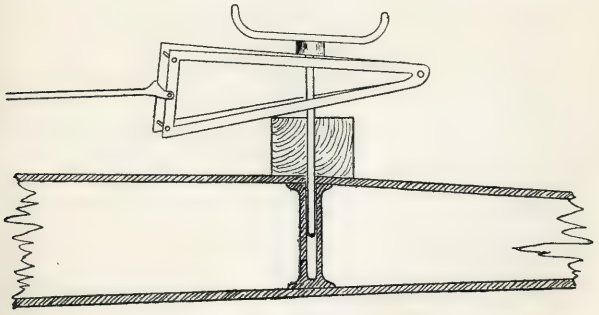
GUN-CRUTCHES.

made in *two* pieces, the longer end being provided with an eye-splice, through which the shorter is bent, so that the length may be adjusted and any shrinkage or stretching allowed for from time to time. With a single rope this is impossible.

The correct balance of the gun on the gun-beam is most important. It should be so laid in position that a moderate pressure of the gunner's left hand (probably six or eight pounds) will serve to tip the barrel for a flying shot. Should the rope have

shrunk (and no readjustment of length have been made), the gun then lies too far forward, and no strength of one arm will avail to move her. A good opportunity to score may thus easily be lost through neglect of this necessary precaution.

THE GUN-CRUTCH supporting the barrel forward, is frequently made too narrow—sometimes a mere rowlock which absolutely confines the gun. This is all wrong, for it allows the gunner no lateral play in taking aim. The aim, in fact, can only be altered by



ELEVATING GEAR FOR PUNT-GUN.
(Not to scale.)

turning the boat's head, a long and hazardous proceeding in face of game already within shot. The forward crutch should have wide arms, extending at least nine inches, and better twelve, as shewn in the accompanying sketch.

THE ELEVATOR is another important adjunct. The sliding bridge with long handle coming inboard (like the long rest at billiards) is fairly efficient; but I prefer the form of elevating gear as shown in the

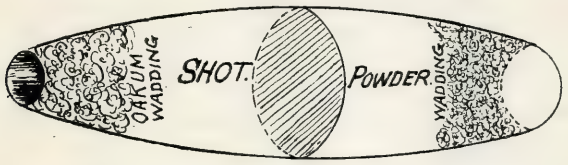
annexed sketch, which has served me well for years. It is formed of two acute-angled, nearly isosceles triangles of brass, fixed together about half-an-inch apart, and enclosing between them, when in position, the shaft of the gun-crutch, as the drawing will show better than words. This gear works easily and noiselessly, only requiring a little grease or mutton-fat about once a week.

Before commencing operations in earnest, half-an-hour will be well spent by the gunner in testing tackle and making sure that all working gear is correctly adjusted and in order. This is best effected by laying the boat (with crew in position) alongside a straight stretch of shore where measurements can be taken and marks set at known distances. The gun should now be "set" so that, with *minimum* elevation, she bears on the water at eighty yards; while with *full* elevation, the centre of her charge at 100 yards will fly, say, 15ft. above sea-level. The gunner should also ascertain by experiment whether the length of breech-rope is correctly adjusted—that is, that the gun can be "tipped" with moderate (but not too little) pressure with the left hand.

POWDER FOR PUNT-GUNS.—Only the coarse-grained powders specially prepared for the purpose must be used, the ignition of fine grained powder (such as is used in game-shooting) being too rapid for the large charges and long barrel of a punt-gun. No powders are better than those known as Hawker's

or Latour's grain, which burn clean and strong, and, if damp, may be dried without deterioration.

The following incident may be a useful warning to the inexperienced. A friend, having run short of punt powder, loaded his gun with 2oz. ordinary sporting gunpowder. The result was that the solid breech-piece, weighing perhaps two pounds, was blown bodily out, carrying away the fore wash-streaks and about two feet of the starboard deck, besides forcing in the trigger-guard and under-lever of a 10-bore (which lay loaded under deck) upon the



CHARGER FOR M-L. PUNT-GUN.

(The compartment for shot is longer and narrower in mouth than that for powder.)

triggers. The gun, fortunately, did not explode, or a serious accident could hardly have been avoided.

Muzzle-loading guns must, of course, be *primed* with fine powder, and the annexed sketch shows a useful form of "charger" (made of strong block tin), half-a-dozen of which can be loaded overnight. Equal measure of powder and shot is a safe and simple rule.

Now as to the best shoulder-guns for coast-shooting. For home use generally, I dislike the huge 4 and 8-bores, chiefly because, for flight-work,

they are too heavy and cumbersome, while for most other purposes a small stanchion-gun is preferable. The power of large shoulder-guns has been much exaggerated. One hears of their being "sighted to 150 yards," and such-like rubbish. Of course, guns can be sighted to drop spent shot into a target on a gunmaker's range, but such performances have no practical value or bearing. The weapon I would prefer, as far more handy, and of quite sufficient power, is a double 10-bore, fully choked. My reason is that this is the largest size that a man of average strength can handle with ease, comfort, and rapidity. A well-built gun of this calibre, 30in. barrels, need not weigh more than 8lb., and will burn 4½drs. coarse powder, throwing nearly 2oz. (by measure) of No. 1 or BB most effectively. In other words, when properly directed, it is capable of bringing down a goose or mallard from the clouds.* Most amateurs, being accustomed to double guns, will find such a weapon infinitely more handy in practice, and more deadly in the long run, than the colossal 4-bores, the use of which it will take half a season thoroughly to acquire. The recoil of these big singles is, moreover, enough to knock a man backwards off the thwart unless he is sitting down tight;

* Most double 10-bores, as ordinarily sold for coast-shooting, weigh 9lb. or upwards. This, however, is unnecessarily heavy, as I show in the next chapter, where I recur to this subject of shoulder-guns, in reply to certain criticisms on the above.

while, if fired from the broadside, it will capsize any single punt. But if the fowler insists on possessing a 4-bore, let him at any rate remember to have the barrel full long—42in. at least—otherwise (in addition to the above-mentioned pleasing tricks) she will fly up forward, black an eye or break the bridge of his nose, and after the third or fourth shot, give him a gun-headache that will last the rest of the day.

It seems that heavy 12-bores are now being specially built and chambered for wild-fowling. This is certainly a step in the right direction, and such guns may, for all I know (since I have not tried them), serve the purpose almost equally as well as the 10-bore I have recommended. But I continue to prefer the latter, as the difference in weight is trifling, while the extra width of bore has an advantage in throwing large shot. I do not believe in "combinations;" a gun that is light enough for every-day game-shooting is of little use in wild-fowling, except as a cripple-stopper.

All gunnery is, of course, a question of compromise, and the above summary briefly represents my own conclusions on the subject after using every size from 16 to 4-bore, and even larger, since my earliest geese were killed with a muzzle-loading monster of $1\frac{1}{8}$in. bore, weighing 16lb. and standing nearly $5\frac{1}{2}$ft. in height.

The punt-gunner will, of course, require in addition an ordinary small-bore for cripple-stopping—the

older the better, provided it is strong and thoroughly serviceable, since salt water and sand, mud, blood, and boatwork are desperately rough on guns and gear.

Before leaving the subject of shoulder-guns, I should add that the 4-bores I have just condemned for home shooting, have nevertheless a special use of their own, either on foreign waters or elsewhere, at home or abroad, where a punt-gun is not available. Under such circumstances the large shoulder-guns come in useful as a substitute—not, be it noted, for any 150-yard practice, but simply in respect of their power of driving a good lane through massed wildfowl at short distance. The following extract from a shooting notebook will serve as an illustration, the scene being, of course, abroad: "Dec. 29.—My friend B. and I, to-day, in two shots with the 4-bores realised 108 ducks,—sixty-one and forty-seven. The first shot, they were mostly teal sitting massed in a thick line along a straight shore, the nearer birds not twenty yards away. Six coots were also killed. We also lost a lot of cripples owing to the dense reeds and spear-grass. The second shot was rather longer, the ducks sitting on open water, but in close ranks. They included a good many wigeon and shovelers."

We have now, in theory, at any rate, provided the young wildfowler with the main gear and implements required for commencing his career. To sum up, these include, first, a double-handed punt, preferably about 21ft. long by 42in. beam, adapted to scull or

"set," but not to paddle; since her breadth (to say nothing of the winter temperature of the water) forbids this; but which, being fitted with centre-boards fore and aft, will carry a spritsail, and in a breeze, cover the ground at six or eight knots under canvas. Secondly, a breech-loading gun of about 80 to 120lb., or even more, preferably London-built, if the exchequer will run to it, otherwise from Birmingham. The barrel, by the way, is better painted than nickel-plated, since the sun, even in mid-winter, does show out at times and causes a gleam on all bright work that may be seen a mile away. Thirdly, a double 10-bore for flighting by day, or odd shots at single birds or desired specimens, as well as an old game-gun for cripples.

There are many minor accessories, such as ammunition-box, anchor, spyglass, cleaning and loading gear, &c., but I pass them over, since in the multiplicity of writings there is confusion, and, after all, each gunner soon finds out what things he requires, and uses them *de gusto*. But one or two matters deserve note. Clothing must be abundant, warm and woollen, all flannel inside, with an outer stratum of tweed, Harris for choice, and white flannel overalls, with plenty of pockets, each having its specific use. But pockets are no good for carrying game; it is too bulky. Here is an instance. I followed seven winged geese on the ooze, picked up six, but could not catch the last, nor use the cripple-

gun with six heavy geese hanging by the neck in one hand. I was obliged to lay these down to shoot the seventh, when all six walked off once more, and a fog coming on, I actually lost two of the birds I had had in hand. The moral is, spend a cartridge on each winged bird as overtaken, and never attempt to carry till all are dead and safe.

For rough weather at sea, oilskin is the only material that is really waterproof and capable of withstanding for hours the constant dash of spray, to say nothing of occasional "green water."

The best headgear is a yachting-cap, peaked in front but not behind, or the collar, when lying flat, tips it over one's eyes. The colour, like all else, white. Sea-boots must be worn, reaching well up the thigh, and, contrary to other writers, I recommend india-rubber as, after all, the best material. The alleged disadvantage is the lack of ventilation, but in fowling afloat one has little walking to do, and the rubber always keeps soft and waterproof, easily repaired should a leak be sprung; whereas leather, unless constantly greased and looked after, is apt to turn as hard as wood and leak at the seams.

There are two dangers to which the wildfowler is specially liable, namely, fogs and sudden gales of wind, the latter particularly about the equinoxes. Now a gunning-punt is a very frail craft, and it is herefore well worth while to provide against such

risks by carrying two small instruments—an aneroid barometer and a compass. Each is small enough to go in a waistcoat pocket. The aneroid not only foretells a coming squall an hour or two beforehand, but is useful in out-of-the-way places in forecasting the probable course of the weather during gales. If its indications are favourable, it may be worth while remaining; if otherwise, go home at once and waste no more time. The pocket compasses with mother-of-pearl dials, made by Lennie, of Edinburgh, are excellent for night use. By faintest moonlight one can read the index, and that without striking a light, which may easily disturb a nice bunch of fowl that had been quietly feeding a quarter-mile away. And in a fog, even at mid-day, it is sometimes difficult without a compass to make out one's position on those wide, featureless mudflats where wildfowl love to assemble.

"PRICKED."

CHAPTER VI.

CONCERNING WILDFOWL AT HOME AND ABROAD.

HAVING now equipped, launched, and commissioned our gun-boat, it may be appropriate, before taking her into action, to make a general survey of the fowl proposed to be attacked, together with their varieties and respective haunts and habits. Books we have already on all branches of sport, some of them perfect monographs; almost every bird or beast of chase boasts a literature, if not a library, of its own; yet technical knowledge percolates slowly. The Badminton volumes have given the *coup de grâce* to many a hard-dying popular illusion, and there is now probably quite a considerable percentage of the "general public" which has ceased to cherish the idea that grouse-driving and covert-shooting are pursuits akin to the slaughter of domestic poultry in a farmyard. Yet even last autumn I remember noticing in one of the London weeklies a full page illustration, entitled, "The First of October," wherein covert-shooting was artistically depicted in full swing; while, about the date mentioned, the cus-

tomary paragraph still goes its round, "Pheasant shooting opened yesterday; birds were found abundant and strong on the wing," and so forth, Now when such things are done in the green tree, what shall we find in the dry?

Wildfowling has always been a thing apart—a sport of the few, though the many do not know it. I remember a very true remark (though I forget where it occurs), that everyone who shoots an odd snipe or two now and again during the season thinks he knows all about wildfowling. No other pursuit is so little understood; or, to speak correctly, so misunderstood. This, however, is essential and inherent to its nature, and can never, perhaps, be otherwise. It follows from the habits and haunts of the fowl themselves. Game-birds we have with us always; they are under daily observation throughout the year. We ought to understand them, whether we do or do not. But wildfowl—the vagrant, far-flying classes denominated wildfowl—stand on a different footing. Here, in England, they are for the most part, winter migrants coming to our shores with the wild gales and in the short, dark days of late autumn—what time the first feathery snowflakes whirl by on the northern blast, when shooting-lodges are hurriedly vacated, and the latest-lingering sportsmen flee to the southward. Wildfowl, moreover, are only to be studied and shot at bleak and remote spots, which, as a rule, demand an organised

expedition to reach, and some small measure of fortitude to remain at when reached.

This pursuit in England may be said to be restricted to the coast, or, at any rate, to the neighbourhood of salt water. I write generally, and am, of course, aware there are notable exceptions to this; but, broadly speaking, inland sportsmen can never know what is really meant by the term wildfowling, nor experience its joys and its sorrows in a land where every marshy corner or patch of bog is drained, and every yard brought into rentable condition. A 6in. drain-pipe is notice to quit, even to such moderate marsh-lovers as blackcock and snipe—how much more to duck and goose? True, there are ducks in the midlands—plenty of them; but I pass them all over in this connection. They live under modern, artificial conditions, and have learnt to adapt themselves thereto. Extremes meet, and some of the wildest creatures in existence are often among the most susceptible to new or adventitious influences. Few birds more readily than ducks and geese submit to domestication, and even their wild races, when protected and undisturbed, soon cast off much of their habitual caution, and become fearless and almost domestic. Witness Waterton's experiments at Walton, and Sir Francis Grant's extraordinary herd of mallards at Monymusk, as described in the Badminton volumes; witness also the frequent records in the *Field* when large numbers

of wild ducks are included in a bag of, perhaps, a thousand pheasants and other game. Those are wild ducks that are no longer wild, though it is quite true they may be (and are) true-bred Anas boschas. Compare, for example, the mallards that the coast-fowler has to deal with. They are a different race. There is no file-firing at them; but when, in winter, the home-bred mallards come down to the tide (frozen out of their ordinary haunts inland), they are indeed a prize to the punt-gunner, and few, comparatively, return. These strangers go in small bunches, eight or a dozen, sit well together, and drift listlessly with the tide all day. They will rise in alarm if a boat passes, or a harmless mussel-gatherer strays within a quarter of a mile—dangers which the regular coast mallard diagnoses and discounts to a nicety, merely paddling out a few yards to watch. Our new friends fear things that threaten not, but fail to detect the real source of danger—the stealthy approach of that low white gunboat; hence a well-timed shot will sometimes "mop up" the lot. Yes, they are a welcome sight to the fowler, these big grey ducks from the moors and marshes of the midlands; but we only have them on the tide in severe winters, when lakes and streams have been ice-bound for ten days or a fortnight.

One other remark, in passing, on inland wild-fowling. There is no absolute reason, beyond that already indicated, why true wildfowl should not be

found far from salt water. On the contrary, there are many species, such as the pintail and gadwall, shoveler, teal, garganey, and pochard, together with all the grey geese and some swans, which show a decided preference for fresh waters and their products, while wigeon are almost equally ready to frequent such spots, provided these are sufficiently extensive and undisturbed. There survive many wild regions, both north and south of our islands, where wildfowl of all these species can be found in abundance in inland marshes far from the sea—that is, they are there quite independent of salt water, whether for resting or feeding.

No: the reason of the absence of wildfowl from the English midlands is simply that modern farming and cultivation have deprived them of every spot that in former days was suitable to their habits, tastes, and requirements. Marshes, water-courses, and shallow pools are drained; aquatic plants are no longer suffered to survive; corn and grass take the place of rush and sedge, and partridge dispossess snipe, duck, and teal. Not so very long ago, when the bittern bred in Lincolnshire, the godwit and avocet, the ruff and spoonbill in East Anglia, and the grey geese in the fens—in those days there were wildfowl in plenty, as is shown by the recorded "takes" in British decoys in the early years of the century, when tens of thousands of fowl were secured in a single decoy in a season.

Clearly it is not a question of latitude, since very many of the species named still continue to breed exactly opposite our coasts—in Holland, Denmark, and even further south—wherever natural conditions continue to prevail, and where there survive miles of mere and morass, flanked by bouncy bog, with their labyrinths of waving sedges, bulrush, and canebrake. These are the inland homes of wildfowl—perfect paradises in spring for the naturalist, in winter for the wildfowler. But "improvements" are not confined to our islands, for even in the wildest countries the reclamation of foreshores, drainage, and so forth progresses slowly but surely. In course of time, when reclamation has become universal—when even the Zuyder Zee and the Baltic shall have become each one great cornfield, and when the beds of Cimbrian broads shall graze sleek cattle—then wildfowl will be banished from Western Europe. Probably their aggregate numbers, taking the Old World all round, will undergo a proportionate decrease, and the whole character of the European avifauna will be modified. Then parliaments and assemblies will enact stringent laws to protect the forms that have vanished for ever.

The study of wildfowl, as already remarked, has always been a thing of itself—a passion of the few. Its literature reflects the fact. Volumes on wildfowl are few in number, but, as a rule, excellent in quality, though—without, in my knowledge, an exception,—

weak as regards ornithology. First, both as to date and excellence, comes Col. Hawker's terse and masterly work, which, *mutatis mutandis*, remains, and will ever remain, the text-book and the Koran of the fowler afloat. Hawker stuck close to facts and his own personal experience. Imagination finds no place in his writings, which are so honest that one can readily see how much and how little he knew—how much of the practical, how little of what I may call the scientific aspect of his subject. The Colonel cared little for ornithology, nor professed any special knowledge thereon, yet some of his writings are true lessons in natural history—witness, for example, the account of his first experience with white-fronted geese in Hampshire, and his description of the plumage of godwits on their spring passage in May. But we live in a different age, when every writer is expected to be a living encyclopædia. If the reader is too exigent, the fact may, perhaps, be adduced as a reason why the writer should endeavour to make his subject appear complete, albeit his technical knowledge is insufficient. I am not approving, or even apologising for the practice—quite the reverse, since the result is disastrous. For some authors subsequent to Hawker, in, perhaps, some such mistaken zeal, have undoubtedly (though themselves good men with punt and gun) produced a whole crop of mistakes and misconceptions as regards wildfowl from a naturalist's point of view.

Such writing might, at one time, have been regarded as invidious; but we grow more practical, and now it is permissible to separate grain from chaff, since errors accumulate when successive writers copy what was originally, perhaps, but a trifling mistake, or slip of the pen, and proceed to amplify it *de gusto*.

My reason for thus writing is my belief that one and all of the books on wildfowling, subsequent to Hawker, tend to give an erroneous impression to the tyro as to the birds which actually constitute British wildfowl. Almost each work contains a long and elaborate catalogue of ducks, geese, and other birds; and by including in these lists every species which on chance occasions has been recorded as occurring in the British Isles, an impression is apt to be conveyed to the learner that British wildfowl comprise Steller's eider, king-duck, surf-scoter, hooded merganser, and a host of others; or that various exotic sandpipers, crakes, rails, herons and the like, are objects of concern to the fowler.

It is unfortunate that so few of our practical wildfowlers should ever have been naturalists, and perhaps more so that several should have considered themselves to be such.

How many men are there living who, if a hundred ducks and geese of different kinds, old and young, and in all their varied stages and phases of plumage, were laid out before them, could distinguish their

species, and assign to each its proper name? Very few, I imagine.

How, then, is the young fowler to distinguish one species from another, on wing or water, at a distance? They cannot, I reply, be so distinguished: and it is largely through guesswork of this sort, coupled with undue credulity and similar causes, that mistakes have arisen, and that the British list is encumbered with scores of European and many transatlantic forms that only cause confusion.

There are, of course, several species of wildfowl, the form, note, or flight of which are sufficiently pronounced and characteristic to be unmistakable, whether by day or night. There are others whose identity can be safely recognised by those who have enjoyed continuous opportunities of observing them, but not otherwise. And how or where is that close personal acquaintance with the different varieties of the duck-tribe to be cultivated? What are British wildfowl? Nominally the list is long; but if the whole bag of game-ducks made in winter on the tidal waters of the east coast could be analysed, I imagine that wigeon alone would account for, say, 80 per cent., while mallard and teal would go far to complete the balance. This would not leave much scope for studying the numerous other kinds.

Similarly with wild geese. My old friends, the Brents, will certainly amount to an even higher

percentage, locally. For I doubt if all the four species of grey geese together contribute 5 per cent. to the year's total: and, on this coast, we have no Bernicle geese.

No; the average fowler on British waters, though he may—and will, if he works hard enough—enjoy a fair and, on occasion, an abundant measure of sport, cannot nowadays look for that variety of game which is certainly a factor, and to some an essential component, in the quality of the sport. That element can now only be sought in the wilder and less "developed" lands beyond the sea. The species one *may* expect to meet with at home I will endeavour to describe in subsequent chapters.

During several winters it has been my good fortune to enjoy duck-shooting as good, perhaps, as any that Europe can afford, and in those very regions where one *does* have the opportunity of seeing, studying, and shooting all those beautiful varieties of the duck-tribe that in England are only common in books, museums, or perfervid imaginations. Such totals as 100, 200, or even 300 wildfowl in a day—all shot from the shoulder—may seem well-nigh incredible to the hard-working British fowler, who can seldom secure half so many in a season; I would scarce credit them myself, had I not seen something of their numbers and of the manner in which they are secured. But it is the quality—that is, the *variety*—almost as much as the quantity that

charms. It is not uncommon to find ten or twelve different kinds of ducks in a single day's bag; while during the winter, in one locality, as many as fifteen or sixteen species may be secured. Since writing the last chapter (No. V.), some six weeks ago, I have completed another winter journey of over 2500 miles in search of wildfowl and big game combined; hence recollections are refreshed and impressions vivid. Here is an illustration.

It is still pitch dark, and for once we are in time! We have ridden nearly a dozen miles through forest and tangled brushwood, and it yet wants an hour till dawn. But there remains the operation of placing six guns in position, each in his sunken tub, 200 yards apart, before daylight shall appear. As the gunning-punt pushes out through samphire and marsh plants the air resounds with wild notes, and at intervals the roar of thousands of wings, as some great host lifts from the water like a carpet, resembles the distant reverberation of thunder. Presently one perceives a greyer glint on the eastern horizon, and slowly the light mounts in the skies. Now the web-footed world is all amove, and in the growing morn one revels in a unique spectacle of wild bird-life. The whole heaven is animate—dotted, streaked, or serried, here with dusky clouds, there with strings and skeins of hurrying forms. Presently the desultory movements begin to focus themselves towards our position, for that line of masked batteries lies direct

PINTAILS AND TEAL.

A SKETCH IN THE SPANISH "MARISMA."

between their nightly feeding-grounds and the shallows where those ducks would pass the day.

It is a fairly dry season: hence there is comparatively but little water, and our firing line commands almost the full width along which the fowl will seek to pass. In wet winters, it is different. Then whole regions are submerged, and flights no longer localised; but to-day we may rely on having ducks in thousands, and comprising almost every species known in temperate Europe, pass right overhead. The hours that follow bring bliss to the gunner or to the naturalist, while to him who happily combines both characters they represent a seventh heaven. But can he distinguish all the different species as they come? No. The shovelers, with their broad bills, are unmistakable; and the pintails —longest, slimmest, and most duck-like of all the duck-tribe—may generally be recognised, while at short range the white eye-streak of the drakes is very conspicuous. But note, that last couple that you *thought* were wigeon, are both gadwall. How is that? Because in the half light the two are indistinguishable on the wing. Later, by daylight, a trained eye can see the difference in the pure white of the wigeon's breast; and, be it remembered, ducks on flight are silent. There are now no index notes to betray character. Wigeon, it is true, occasionally break out in their sibilant chorus, and one also hears the low quacking of teal, hundreds of

which swim within earshot; but while on flight they and the rest are silent. The diving ducks (*Fuligulæ*) one recognises, generically, by their short wings, squat build, and laboured, rapid flight; of these, pochard, ferruginous, and tufted ducks soon go to swell the pile, and one out of a pair of ruddy sheldrakes forms a handsome addition. The flight of these latter resembles that of geese rather than ducks. But what are these that pass like a hurricane and fairly disconcert one with unwonted speed? When coming in we took them for teal, but they are bluer, bigger, and have twice the wing-power of teal, without any of the latter's tumbling tricks. Luckily the left has stopped one by a pure fluke—a garganey drake—and the next shot brings another surprise. They came high, with teal-like flight, but bulking big as wigeon. A neat right and left proves these to be marbled ducks, and the next two hours add several more to the bag, as well as greylag and bean geese, mallards, pintails, shovelers, and the usual hecatomb of wigeon and teal.

I remember once asking a neighbouring gun if he had shot anything unusual. "No, nothing but two mallards, the rest are all wigeon," was the reply. The two mallards were a pintail and a shoveler (females), and from among the wigeon protuded the unmistakable orange feet, with black webs, of a gadwall, while three more proved to be marbled ducks. These facts being pointed out, the culprit seemed

to feel his position acutely, and was forgiven on promising to be more careful in future. A few days later we had sorted out a bag of ducks according to species, when our friend, brimming over with conscious virtue, strolled up to a long line of some seventy or eighty—all wigeon—and remarked, "Ah, now that you lay them out like that, it is easy to see what a lot of different kinds there are!"

Duck-flighting of this sort affords, probably, as smart shooting as can be found. The forward allowance for passing shots, to right or left, is as great, or even greater than that required for grouse. As our Spanish friends put it, it is very necessary *correr la mano*, which may be interpreted "to keep the hand running." For high, incoming birds the gun, when aligned, must be sharply tipped up by the left hand at the moment of pulling, or no crumpled duck will crash into the water behind. No. 7 is the most effective shot, and all cripples must receive a second dose, or they will not be recovered, save by the marsh-harriers which hang around on every side, and boldly pounce on the wounded within 200 yards. Never leave your tub in pursuit of winged duck; you lose your own sport and spoil that of your friends, and after all you will not catch the bird. But I must here pull up sharp.

Before concluding this chapter, I will revert, in a few sentences, to the vexed question of guns.

My conclusions in regard to the best shoulder-guns

for wildfowling, have been questioned by those who prefer larger weapons to the 10-bore I have recommended. Well, it is largely a matter of individual capacity and taste; but, I may point out, I was not presuming to advise accomplished wildfowlers who have long ago, as I have, fixed on their favourite weapons. There is a natural tendency to conclude that a weapon which has been found during long years of service thoroughly effective, *must* therefore necessarily be the best obtainable. But that is not proved when other and different guns have not been tested in competition. Thus should a man be suited at his first choice, and stick exclusively to that weapon, his opinion can hardly be accepted as a criterion on the whole subject. Personally I have gone through the whole lot; for, having commenced with the largest sizes of shoulder-guns made and discarded these, one after another, I can at least speak from practical knowledge of them all; but I repeat that I do not wish to combat the conclusions of practical fowlers, and merely venture to give my experiences and opinions for the benefit of the rising generation of wildfowlers, and in that sense, and having tried every size of gun, I know the advice was sound, and stand by it. The developments in modern rifles appear to present an analogous case. The heavy 2 oz. and 4 oz. weapons of a generation ago seem in danger of being displaced by the Express, and the largest game is now killed with

the modern ·450—indeed, if we are to believe the most "advanced," with tiny weapons of ·303. Thus, too, wildfowl can certainly be killed with the full-choked 10-bore. On the other hand, there are wildfowlers of experience who recommend the double 8-bore, and tell us that with it they kill fast-flying wildfowl and even snipe. But I am sure no one will argue that the 8-bore is therefore the best adapted for such work. Rather, I would say, the contrary; and it will perhaps be admitted that such success is due rather to personal skill, despite the handicap of a heavy gun, than to any special virtues such weapons may possess. Again, it has been contended that a 10-bore cannot be built to weigh only 8lb., or, if built so light, that it would be better as a 12. Now I had a 10-bore built for me, and according to my own ideas, by a local maker, in 1877 (30in. barrels), which weighs *one ounce less* than 8lb., and after constant use at home and abroad during eighteen years, I can confidently state that this gun is quite 20 yards better than any 12-bore—that is to say, quite as effective at 50 yards as the 12-bore is at 30 yards. Beyond that distance (50 yards) it is a matter of large shot, and there the smaller bore is simply "not in it."

The question of the employment of large shot in small bores—is also most interesting, and I regret that considerations of time and space prevent my going further into it at present.

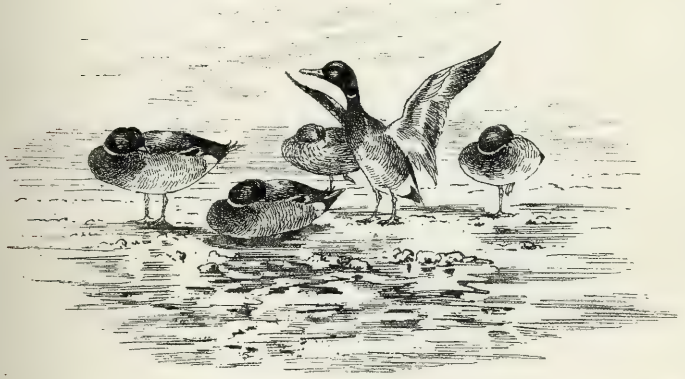
CHAPTER VII.

DUCK-SHOOTING WITH THE STANCHION-GUN, BY DAY AND NIGHT.

THE wild duck family as a whole is by nature broadly divided into two well-defined groups, and the marked difference in the respective habits of each section places them, from a fowler's point of view, in quite distinct categories. Of these, the first, and by far the most important, whether as regards its sport-giving or edible qualities, is the group of surface-feeding ducks—that is, those which never dive for their food; and which, in the absence of any clear distinctive title, I have previously christened "game-ducks." For this group includes nearly all the truly sporting species, comprising mallard, wigeon, and teal; together with pintail, gadwall, garganey, and shoveler. The distinctive characteristic of all these (though the last two least so) is their predilection to feed by night and to rest by day: but, it should here be added, only the three first-named concern, to any considerable extent, the average British fowler.

The essential characteristic of the second group—the diving ducks—is that they chiefly (pochard

excepted) feed by day. It follows from the method of their living, and their means of a livelihood, that this should be so, since submarine grottos or meadows cannot well be explored in the dark. The diving ducks include pochard, golden-eye, scaup, tufted duck, and several species of purely marine habitat (such as the scoters, eiders, and long-tailed ducks, which but rarely concern the punt-gunner), together with the strictly fish-eating mergansers—



MALLARDS.

these last wholly uneatable, and roughly forming a link between the true ducks and the grebes and divers (*Colymbidæ*). It is this radical difference in habit that so differentiates the two groups from the fowler's standpoint; for whereas the diving-ducks are regularly to be found inside harbours by day, feeding in the creeks and tidal channels, and therefore frequently contributing to his bag, the

game-ducks, on the contrary, are rarely so found, their habit being to feed all night on the ooze, but to leave such sheltered waters and fly out to sea (or other safe refuge) with the first streak of dawn, and often before that. At chance times, since there is no rule without its exception, and especially during severe frosts, the fowler's eye may be delighted by the sight of some company of mallards or wigeon, or a little bunch of teal, that from some cause—it may be laziness or oblivion, possibly the effect of dining too well overnight, more probably short commons in severe weather—have omitted for once their customary caution, and remain sleeping away the hours of daylight.

Such opportunities should always be made the most of. They form the luxury of duck-shooting afloat. For they are quite exceptional, and by far the greater number of shots at game-ducks are only to be obtained *by night*, when difficulties increase tenfold, hardships a hundred.

On the larger estuaries and bays, which are regularly shot over every day by punt-gunners, it is practically useless nowadays to expect to find game ducks inside after daybreak—at least from November onwards. They then know the risks too well, and take care to disappear before dawn. How, then, is the fowler to secure a shot at these at all during the day? Well, where competition is so intensely keen, it is not easy—far from that; it may be impossible.

WIGEON.

From the life.

But there are two or three contingencies that *may* offer a chance, and which it is worth while at least to take into account. Practically it amounts to this: That the successful fowler must get a point ahead of his rivals in some way or other; he may have struck out some new line of his own: or, by more careful observation of the birds, have detected some peculiarity unknown to the rest. A precise local knowledge of the varying haunts of the fowl is all-important. Where, for example, do the ducks spend the day? To answer this question involves time, trouble, and some little patience; but it is worth some trouble to ascertain whither they have sped in the dark gloom of the dawn. To the open sea or to private waters, is the usual reply. In either case, nothing then remains to be done, since a gunning-punt will not face open sea; but it is questionable if *the whole* of them (I refer to mallards) have "taken the sea." Some few—it may be only a score or two—may have also struck out a course of their own, or developed an enterprise that may now cost them dear. This minority have perhaps discovered some new haunt—say a creek or insignificant estuary, which affords rest and shelter, though itself too small for regular punting operations. The outflow of quite small streams are often worth a survey, for they are specially favourite resorts, provided, of course, they are remote, and devoid of high banks or covert—that is, that the surroundings

are dead flat and clear for some few hundred yards. One such spot presents itself to my mind's eye—a low, sandy delta of 100 acres, traversed by the winding course of a small stream, but sheltered to seaward by a reef of tidal rocks.

But such spots, if they exist at all, may be some distance along the coast. How are you to get your punt there? Admittedly this is a troublesome operation; but, provided you know your mallards are strongly haunted, that trouble may be repaid. By the aid of a farmer's long cart, supplied with a plentiful bedding of hay, the punt can without risk, if properly secured, be conveyed several miles overnight. But the young fowler will bear in mind, first, that a couple of extra hands will be required (besides himself and puntsman) safely to lift the boat from her cradle and set her afloat; and, secondly, that he must be aboard and in trim for instant action before dawn shall break, for in such narrow limits there is no room for manœuvring, and the ducks, if they come at all, will probably have to alight almost within shot of the hidden gunner. An extra degree of caution is therefore needed where the slightest bungle, precipitancy, or flurry will render the night's work in vain. On the other hand, success attained under difficulties is sweet. Needless to say, the wilder the morning the better the chance.

I have instanced a difficult case first. It may be that you discover some resort that is accessible by

sheltered water: though, if so, the spot is sure to be remote, and the exigencies of tide may necessitate a very early start, even if they do not involve spending the whole night on the enterprise. Some years ago, it was my good luck to enjoy, for a couple of seasons, the sole use of such a spot—a sequestered backwater, flanked by miles of brown sand and dunes. Almost every day (it was not always necessary to start early, since this place was only accessible at full tide), one might count on a shot at mallards, till a too garrulous tongue disclosed our secret "in confidence," whereupon all the world (comprising three others) flocked thither. That same winter, after a succession of severe gales, the sands shifted, and our backwater, cut off from the tide, became a stagnant pool, no longer attractive to ducks. It was a sad blow—as when, in early spring, the trout-fisher oft-times finds his favourite pool of former years all silted up by winter floods, the deep hole with its hanging brae vanished, and the current running quite shallow in a new channel.

Again, there may be found some duck-frequented spot which is accessible only by towing the punt across a stretch of open sea. With care, this is always feasible in smooth water, but the towing is preferably accomplished by a rowing boat, the punt being towed stern first, and made secure by water-tight covering boards fitting over the cockpit. In a very light, but steady breeze, we have towed a punt

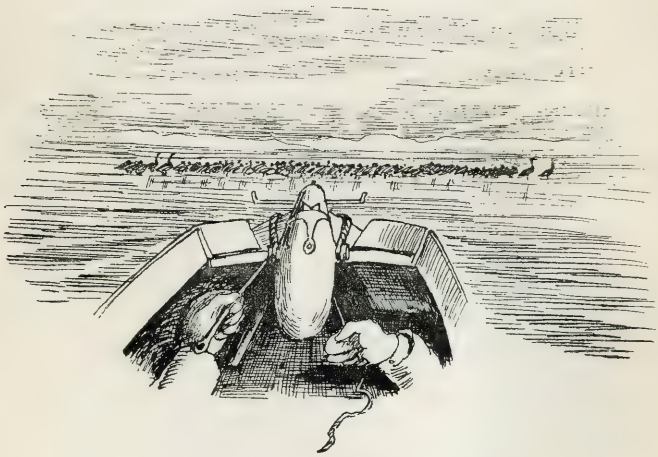
for half the night behind a small cutter. Needless to say, the gun and gear are carried in the larger craft.

It may occur to analytical minds that the amount of labour is not commensurate with the utmost possible reward—*i.e.*, on the one hand, a single shot at mallards—on the other, a hard night's work, *plus* a cold breakfast on beer, bread and cheese. I am not going to argue that the game *is* worth the candle; but there is a period in life (past, it may be for some of us) when hard work and endurance are ignored, when cost is not counted, but adverse odds accepted, and no price deemed too high if thereby can be achieved some result one's mind is set upon. In duck-shooting one thing is certain: you will not otherwise get a shot by day. In September or October, it is true, when they first come (mostly young birds) ducks do for a short time attempt to remain about the oozes by day; but experience soon teaches caution, and, after November, you are almost as likely to see alligators about the saltings as mallards or wigeon, and this, too, in places where by night they swarm. The protracted frosts of a hard winter, however, may again force them to change their habits in this respect.

Well, we will suppose our young friend has taken the odds, tramped those miles in the dark and stormy night at the cart tail: first along a country lane, the last mile along a field-track ankle-deep in

mud. He and his men have tenderly launched the boat, and just as day is breaking a fine company of thirty or forty mallards coming in from sea rejoice his sight. These ducks have spent many days here unmolested, consequently they come in straight, no preliminary wheeling, and one sees their tails spread and red paddles stretched forward to check the impetus of flight. Down they splash into the shallow pool or backwater, where the meeting of tide and current forms a slack. For a whole minute each duck sits motionless, just where he dropped, every neck craned, while every eye surveys the surroundings. But they see nothing unusual; the punt lies hidden behind a bend in a sand-bank, and one by one the mallards commence to dip, splash, and preen—in short, to enjoy their morning tub. This continues for ten minutes, until at last three or four drakes are seen nimbly running on the bank, chasing one another and pretending to fight. Soon the whole company follows them ashore, and after more wing-flapping, drying, and pluming, beaks are tucked away under scapulars, and the siesta has begun. Now is the time to push out gently, and drop down stream towards them. Gently—for the stream is doing half the work; we only require to maintain steerage way. We are nearly in shot now, and not a head is raised nor a note uttered, but we will get them better in line by going a little more to starboard; moreover, we shall thereby close

in the single sentry who sits clear of the far end of the bunch. Steady—that will do. We can now rake their company at seventy yards, and a round dozen are as good as aboard. But how near will you go? Ah, that is a crucial question in duck-shooting afloat. It is the pith of the science, and almost everything depends on it. I know well



"PULL!"

WILDFOWL FROM THE FOWLER'S POINT OF VIEW.

(All mallards: range seventy yards: sentries already craning up necks.)

enough how to answer it for myself, and proceed so to answer it now. Take them all sitting at anything under eighty yards, though, should there be clearly no risk in holding on, you may go twenty yards nearer.

Well, we have gathered our dozen ducks—each a lovely object, for, after all, no handsomer creature flies than the mallard drake. We have earned our

bread and cheese, and can trudge home in triumph. But have we done right? There are two ways of taking such shots, and unquestionably the system of firing *as they rise* is the most effective; but the risk of total failure is terrible—too terrible to contemplate. The space of time in which ducks spring clear of the trajectory of a punt-gun is actually infinitesimal—some minute fraction of a second. Therefore, unless the response of hand to thought is absolutely instantaneous, not a feather will be touched. I admit being unequal myself to perform this feat, though I have at times done it by a fluke and reaped the reward. I am not recommending my own method to my pupil, but describe both, and leave him to discover which of the two best suits his capacities.*

Briefly, the question may be summed up thus: In ten fair shots, taking the ducks on the "bird-in-hand" principle, he will score, say, ten each time, which equals 100. On the "scientific principle" he will perhaps clean miss five fair shots (too much that for my philosophy), but *may* make five *brilliant* shots that realise a score apiece—again a total of 100. But it would be safer to assume that those brilliant shots only averaged fifteen each, in which case the less ambitious gunner will be 25 per cent. to the good.

* In subsequent chapters I recur to this all-important point of "timing the shot."

So far I have only referred to mallard, since wigeon never frequent such spots as those indicated. They, with the great bulk of the mallards, go direct at dawn to open water, salt or fresh, and in either case are equally inaccessible to the punt gunner.

WIGEON are among the earliest of the winter migrants to appear on the coast, many arriving in September. Towards the end of August I have noticed them assembling in packs of a hundred or two each, in the broad sounds north of Trondhjem's fjord; and all in that restless, unsettled state that forbodes an early departure. Once, when returning from Norway about mid-September, we enjoyed a fine view of these ducks, just at dusk, coming out from the coast, and heading high to seaward. Next day, in mid-ocean, we twice descried packs of wigeon high in the heavens, and bound on a course that would strike our sea-board somewhere about the Humber. I may here add that the few diving ducks that I have ever chanced to see *on passage* have nearly always been flying low on the water. Of the wigeon I shall have something more to say when I come to the subject of night-punting; but of their habits while on our coast in winter, both by day and night, I frankly admit I can add but little to the full descriptions already given in my book "Bird-Life of the Borders," and which six more years' experience have only served to confirm.

TEAL are essentially lovers of fresh water; hence they are rarely found frequenting the tidal ooze. One meets with them there, it is true, early in autumn (in August and September) when they are moving southwards; but in winter they are seldom seen except in severe weather, when they are frozen out inland, and perforce came to the tide. After shooting afloat for a week in December without so much as seeing a single teal, I have sprung a dozen from a rushy stream within a mile or two of "full-sea mark." But when streams and springs are frozen, then the teal, in little trips of half a dozen or so, come in, and a welcome sight they are to the gunner, being fairly accessible to a punt. Yet they seldom present a good shot—I speak, of course, only of those parts of the coast that I know personally—since, owing to their small numbers and habit of constantly picking about on the mud-edges, among the shallows where the zostera lies half-awash, toying, as it were, with the grass, they are usually widely scattered. So long as they continue picking, bowing, and swimming to and fro, one may safely hold on, though already in fair shot, and await a more favourable combination; but the moment their heads go up, one must fire—that is, if they then present a shot at all—since in another instant they will have sprung into the air, light as summer butterflies.

Teal and wigeon both show rather dark on the water; while the pearly-grey backs of mallard drakes,

showing conspicuously amongst a pack, serve to distinguish the species. But wigeon will seldom be long in revealing their identity, either by a stray note or by the white wing-patches of the old drakes as they sit up to flap. This latter characteristic must not be confounded with the white speculum on the wings of golden-eyes, &c., though should the mistake be made, it will soon be corrected on observing the constant diving of the last-named birds.

Gadwall, garganey, shoveler, and pintail, I pass by very briefly. The two former I have never once met with on salt water—I refer to England; while my few notes respecting the other two more concern the naturalist than the fowler, who, on the eastern coast, may shoot for twenty winters, and not see either one or the other.*

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* It is a curious circumstance that, up to the date of publishing "Bird-Life of the Borders," I had not a single record of the occurrence of pintails on the North-east coast. In the following autumn (October, 1889), quite a number of these handsome ducks appeared and several were shot—all immature. Since then some have come every year at the same season, and they are now regularly looked for, and known to the local gunners as "Long-necks." No adults, to my knowledge, have been secured—merely bands of young birds passing along the coast, and remaining no length of time. Why they should thus have suddenly changed their line of migration is one of those things that no one, probably, can explain. Shovelers arrive in March in pairs, and at once settle down at some inland pool (usually, but not always, near the coast), where they remain to breed. They nest generally in the growing grass of the hay-fields, and depart as soon as their young are able to fly—in August. Hence they cannot be regarded as of any importance to the punt-gunner. The numbers of these breeding pairs of shovelers appear to be increasing—despite systematic robbery of their eggs—and they are locally known as "spoonbills."

But after all, work as he may, the keenest fowler will do but little comparatively with the game-ducks by day. It is at night, and by night only, that, even with all modern appliances, the gunner really comes to terms with wild ducks. It is hard work admittedly, and in some ways uncongenial; yet among the many strange scenes and sounds to which punt-gunning introduces the fowler, there are none more impressive and in a sense more attractive than those which he perforce enjoys when lying in his punt on the midnight ooze. The flowing tide is creeping up the flats, the punt creeps up with it, keeping close under the mud-edge or along some winding creek which traverses the desolate waste. All over this zostera-clad ooze there are ducks, ducks in hundreds, but all scattered here and there, feeding against time; for soon, they know, the tide will have covered the mud and set them afloat, to complete their dinners on such chance drift weed as they may come across. The gunner's object is to discover the point towards which the ducks will congregate preparative to the incoming tide, and in this his only guide are their notes. Of the various nocturnal sounds to which the midnight fowler listens, he pays attention to but two, those of mallard and wigeon. Both of these are, of course, well known, the low soliloquy of the mallard drake with the noisier refrain of his mate, audible half a mile away, and the musical, clear-toned whistle of

the wigeon. These resound on every side. Where are they thickest? For an hour longer we lie patiently endeavouring to solve that problem. We see ducks at times nearly aboard us—twos and threes, sixes and eights, feeding, splashing, paddling along the dusky shore or in the moonlit shallows. We can hear the spluttering of their beaks on the ooze, as they crop the fronds of sea-grass. Others in little trips hurry past, overhead or behind, to right or left, close by in the dark skies. Here, not half a gun-shot away, down splash a dozen with satisfied quacking on the shallow in front, or disappear against the dark gloom of the ooze. But they are all scattered; nowhere can a dozen be seen together. Where are they thickest? There, towards the loom of the higher land, which interrupts the rays of the moon—there, in that dark direction, where nothing can be distinguished by the keenest eye. Thence comes rolling across the waste a low gentle chorus like the purring of a thousand cats. That is the point to which the wigeon are assembling, and that chorus is the self-satisfied purring of the females, uttered even as they still guzzle the sea-grass. By its volume, one can roughly estimate their numbers—there are mallards with them also; this one notes with joy. The latter are all feeding in the mouth of the shell-paved burn, which here crosses the saltings, but the tide will soon drive them all together. Hark, that modulated whistle

far away might almost have been a teal drake had the month been September, but it is December, and we know that that pipe comes from the throat of a sheld-drake. Now his mate answers him in a long-drawn vibrating bark. A cloud of knots and dunlins sweep overhead with a rush as of a whirlwind, and cover the mud like a carpet; the growling notes from their myriad little throats almost drown the distant chorus of the ducks, but presently the latter bursts out in louder key—for fully half a minute a hurricane of notes. The wigeon are "all in a charm;" then for some seconds there is comparative silence. Again and again, at recurring intervals, the outburst breaks out, to sink again into silence. The fowl are collecting against the incoming tide, and this is the signal to fall in. Another hour passes; it is three o'clock, and we can now begin to gauge the chances of the night. So far, everything points to this being our "night out," the lucky one in a hundred (mostly blanks). To-night the fowl are setting in towards the mussel-beds of "Morrison's batt," the highest bank, and therefore last to be covered by the tide; hence the most favourable for a shot, since the big gun is at least twice as effective on fowl ashore as on fowl afloat. Yes; we are indeed in luck to-night; for, as the punt draws in to the final advance, we just clear the point of the high land with its dark loom; and now, full in the bright water and the horizontal rays of the sinking

moon, we at length perceive our friends. They are still in full "charm;" but anxious moments remain ere that last hundred yards is made good. In no other sport within my knowledge is there more concentration of excitement, more prolonged suspense, than is experienced during these critical moments of yet undecided fate, with the noisy masses of wildfowl already *almost* in shot, and the trigger lanyard tightly twisted around one's fingers—no, not even when at length, for the first time, the fore-sight of the rifle dwells in thrice-refined aim on the shoulder of some grand beast one has sought out in his haunts, hunted or stalked, perhaps for days, it may be for weeks on end; or when the rod bends to the first mad rush of a thirty-pounder. There, before us are the ducks we have worked for all night—aye, for a score of nights; there they sit, five hundred of them, all crowding in the moonlight on to that last low mussel-scaup that in five more minutes will be submerged. What a spectacle of animation they present during these few seconds while the punt shoots silently forward. The dark outline keeps altering as outsiders spring on wing and attempt to wedge themselves into the centre of the crowd. All is life and movement, while a torrent of sibilant voices, of purrs and growls, rolls along in undulating waves of sound. A record shot now seems a certainty. Yet well we know that a score of mischances may ruin the game at the last moment—one untoward

noise of man, boat, gun, or gear; the touch of the iron-shod setting-pole on a stone; the boat taking the ground forward, and swinging round with the racing tide; straggling ducks springing and giving the alarm. A cruel mischance is a distant shot from another gunner; but, cruellest luck of all, a miss-fire—then one may have to pull homewards with an empty boat and a deadly sickness about the heart. But luck is not always bad. In all things, even in wildfowling, the hardest and most precarious sport of all, one occasionally has moments of bliss, and these serve to leaven the rest. And of those happier hours, none exceeds in sense of true triumph that glorious moment when one sees the wary wigeon at last out-manœuvred, and their ranks well raked at close quarters by a pound of No. 2. The man who has done this has done something of which he may be proud for life.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON WILD GEESE AND SWANS.

WITH DIRECTIONS IN THE AIMING AND FIRING OF PUNT-GUNS, AND IN "TIMING THE SHOT."

WILD geese of all kinds differ from the true ducks—as described in the last chapter—in this essential characteristic, that they are naturally day-feeding fowl. Beyond this primary point, the six British species of wild geese are divisible, *inter se*—equally by nature as in the unlearned view of the fowler—into two distinct groups, viz.:—(1) The larger grey geese, of which there are four kinds, and (2) the black geese, which comprise the remaining two.

The distinguishing features of the two groups (beyond mere colour and well-defined structural differences) are that, while the grey geese prefer the land, feeding on stubble, clover-lea, or pasture, and only resorting to the tidal area to rest or sleep, the black division, on the contrary, are of strictly marine habitat, grazing (like mallard and wigeon) on the tidal mud-flats, and roosting on the rolling wave.

I should here explain that, in speaking of black geese, my remarks must be confined exclusively to

the Brent species, since I have never happened to see a Bernicle goose alive. The geographical distribution of this bird in our islands is curious. That their distant breeding haunts lie far to the north-west (chiefly, that is, along the east coast of Greenland, above the Iceland Channel and the ice-block, and barely reaching Spitsbergen), may perhaps explain the fact that on our N.E. coast they are unknown, resorting chiefly to the west coast and to Ireland, where I have never shot. Forty years ago an old friend of mine (since dead) killed six at a shot on the Northumbrian coast, but since that date not a single bernicle goose has, within my knowledge, been killed on this side—a remarkable circumstance, seeing that they yearly visit the Solway.

Leaving the grey division for the present, I will take the black geese first, partly because I know them (and love them) best, but chiefly because they are—in England, that is—by far the gamest and most sport-giving of their genus, and, indeed, of all the wildfowl race. To the Brent goose is due the coast-fowler's deepest debt of gratitude, since he is to be found in force all day long on tidal ooze and shallow, ever ready to back his keen wit with his life, to meet cunning with caution, and to defy every art and stratagem of man to secure him. Punting to Brent is the cream of coast-gunning, for our black-breasted friend does not (like the ducks last described) demand that the fowler shall sally

forth at dead of night, by the feeble light of a winter's moon, and when, perchance, a foot of snow covers the ground and the thermometer registers 20° of frost. For him, one need not spend the midnight hours groping about amidst frozen sludge and ooze, peering into sightless darkness in the endeavour to distinguish ducks from drift sea-ware or from a pack of surging ice-floes, whose moving outline has nearly drawn ere now a futile fire: one's ears the while tingling with pain and frost-benumbed fingers scarce able to handle the elevator and lanyard. No, the fowler may now breakfast comfortably at eight o'clock—nine, if you like—and go afloat at half-flood with a tolerable certainty, in a good locality, of being in frequent touch of the enemy during the light of day, of enjoying at any rate truly delightful spectacles of massed wildfowl in the wintry sunshine, and of being back on the ebb to five o'clock tea.

I emphasise the fowler's enjoyment of the scene, for he may very easily have no more tangible reminiscence to bring ashore. Blank days are, and in wildfowling must ever be, numerous—that is, where nothing less than a big shot will suffice to fulfil aspirations. To me, no day afloat is ever really blank, let the bag be *nil* again and again—provided always, and specially excepted from this definition, that the empty fore-peak is not due (as it often is) to some monstrous blunder or misjudgment

A WINTER'S EVE.—(WILD GEESE.)

"EBB TIDE, AND ONLY FIVE MINUTES LEFT TO FEED."

of my own, which things indeed may vex the soul and torment the memory for years to come.

Let us look at the conditions of this contest of reason against instinct. First, as to place :—I am always speaking of mud-flats, tidal oozes, and so forth, since I know of no other words better descriptive of such spots. To wildfowlers the terms are sufficiently indicative; but there may be others to whom they convey too restricted an idea as regards space, and the immensity of those dreary wastes which form the winter home of wigeon and wild geese. The latter will never frequent any spot where they cannot enjoy, at any rate, a square league or two, ten preferred, of dead flat mud, and that mud so rotten that a man will sink to his middle at the first step, and where, in places, an oar held vertically will sometimes disappear of its own weight.

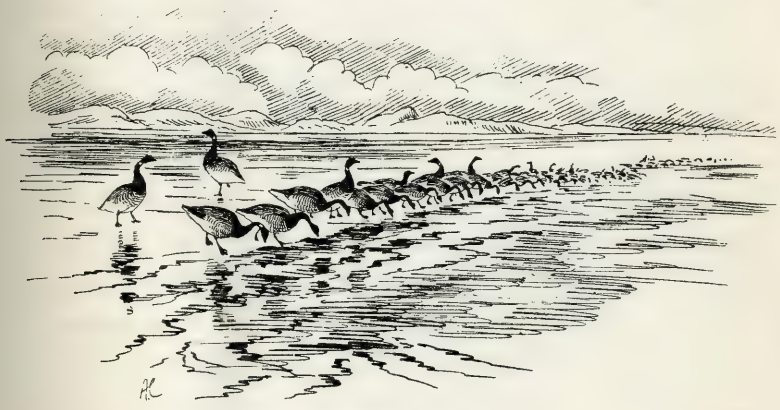
So flat and bare are these wastes, so denuded of every land-mark, feature, or irregularity of surface by the daily sweep of the tide, that quite small objects are visible at immense distances. The sense of distance, indeed, to a large extent is lost, and curious optical illusions are not infrequent. Lying low in one's punt, the whole horizon of three or four miles appears compressed into a space no larger than a tennis-lawn; it is easy to mistake a group of men—say cockle-diggers or bait-gatherers, three miles away on the mud—for a bunch of fowl pitched

at 500 yards or so, and *vice versâ*. What one has taken with the naked eye to be a single bird in mid-distance proves to be a boat lying on a bank at furthest range of vision; and more than once I have seen (with the glass) the figures of men in the far distance beneath the bodies of curlews that were probing about the sands some quarter of a mile away. Such are a few of the tricks that space can play with eyesight.

To return to our geese. To such spots, where miles of mud-flats flank the land, and dreary sand-dunes separate the slob from the sea beyond, thither flock the brents in black battalions at break of day. By companies and detachments they come in from sea, clanging down a wild chorus as they speed through the upper air towards green oozes where the zostera carpets the mud with emerald fronds. Black forward and white astern are their predominant colours, and as they lower their flight the long files, now low on the water, resemble giant centipedes clawing along. Now watch them wheel in air like a black swarm of bees, though always maintaining their chain-like formations; to and fro they wheel over their chosen feeding ground in a hundred concentric, opposing circles, then with a crash of bird-music and flapping of dark pinions the whole host is down. Full five hundred have pitched on the green spit before us, a second company in the bight beyond; but the main army is still on

wing. We can see them still flying inwards, bound for the big banks six miles up the estuary.

The geese at once commence their breakfast; with the glass you can see them all a-guzzle, their black necks down as they advance, tearing up and devouring the trailing blades of sea grass. For some two hours they will remain intent on breakfast; then one will see little parties going off to drink, splash, and preen in the nearest channel. The



ON THE OOZE.

mid-day interlude follows, when, should the weather be mild, the whole company indulge for a few hours in rest or play, chasing one another till the water flies, while the volume of sound is a thing to be remembered: not even parliaments are in it with wild geese. Towards afternoon they are hungry again, and feed with desperate energy as the sun lowers to "take the hill," for then they know the

time is at hand when they must clear out in one great sonorous host—all bands playing—bound for the open sea.

We will return to the time when they pitched, hungry, in the morning; there they sit, five hundred of them, within half a mile of our punt—how are we to secure them? Naturally our young friend is all anxiety to go in and win—to pull off a big shot and score his first wild goose right away. But stop; observe that those geese are sitting far up on the dry, full 500 yards from the furthest fringe of the flowing tide, and in the midst of a green ooze that stretches unbroken for at least a mile on either side. Its surface is as level and as green as a vast billiard table; there is not a bank, a break, nor the slightest irregularity as far as eye can see, nor is there a creek that will float a feather (much less a gunning-punt), or a "drain" whereby even a mouse could approach unseen. The tide will not take us in to their position for an hour; and then? Is it conceivably possible that geese, the wariest and keenest-eyed of wildfowl, will then permit the approach of a craft of any kind and in full view, within the utmost range of shot? Well, it is not likely at all—even a Chinese ironclad can only be safely torpedoed after dark; still, it *is* possible. True there is no *natural* "advantage" of any kind on that level ooze; but other deceits have before availed, and some may serve again. To array boat

and gun in a verdant vesture of sea grass is an aboriginal idea, but dirty and of little modern value, since grassy islets are known by geese to be fixtures, and, should they drift on the tide, will at once arouse their acute suspicions. There are, however, things that *do* drift. For example, when it blows hard outside, the sea foam, in tawny patches, comes driving up on the flood. You may try sea foam as a blind: but, remember, it has no cohesion, and unless it elects to drift exactly in the required direction is of no avail, since you cannot guide it. A more amenable blind is an armful of straw laid on the fore deck. I decline to guarantee its efficacy; but in harbours where flight-gunners abound, the straw bundles on which they have lain overnight are common objects about the tideways, and, having served the purpose before, are worth passing note. On large river-estuaries, where branches and such-like wreckage are carried down from inland by winter floods, these have also served to screen a punt's approach. During the present winter I "got in" thus to thirteen mallards on an open ooze. Being scattered, feeding, they did not offer a shot for the big gun, so we shoved in near enough to "mop up" two drakes and a duck with one barrel of the 10-bore. Again, in hard winters, when the spring tides set afloat a fortnight's accumulation of ice and frozen snow from the upper flats, these ice floes, drifting to and fro on the tide, offer the best

possible opportunity for masking the punt. They should not be placed on deck, being too heavy, but two or three convenient cakes, piled one on another, may be made fast forward, floating on either bow.

Stratagems that may succeed at first are apt to become known to the fowl, and of no further avail; but different localities present different conditions, some one or other of which may suggest new deceits to the fowler.

But, after all, I am only toying with the subject, since all such devices are but side issues in the main enterprise upon which we are engaged. And let it be borne in mind that no enterprise in the whole field of sport presents difficulties greater or more insuperable than this—no game-bird on earth enjoys such favouring environment, nor is there a beast of forest, fjeld, or sierra (none, at least, that I have yet seen) which possesses in its haunts such natural tactical advantage over its pursuers as do these far-sighted geese on their vantage ground of verdant ooze. Logically they are actually inaccessible — their position inexpugnable. Hence no failure, no score of failures in an undertaking where you start with 100 to 1 the worst of it, need disturb equanimity or discourage further effort. Quite the reverse; stick to them through thick and thin—try any scheme or experiment that may suggest itself, but *stick to them*, go on shoving in to them, waiting on them, watching them, day after day.

Believe me, all this time you are on the right road to final success; for you are "coaxing the geese." By degrees, since you never fire a shot or otherwise annoy them, you will in a measure annul those acuter suspicions, and in time half persuade their vigilant sentries to relax their fears, to grow accustomed to your constant attendance, and even to doubt if, after all, that low white craft is so much to be dreaded or always held at half a mile.

Stick to your geese; never lose faith, and never fire a random shot till the real chance has come. Then, some fateful eve, you will reap an ample reward. Perhaps you catch the geese at last within reach of a sheltering creek; but—far more gratifying to your patience and strategy—you find yourself, on open water, within fair shot of the dark phalanxes that so long have defied you. You will hardly believe your eyesight. There swim those impossible geese—almost careless they seem—well within shot; you can actually see the white half-moon on their glossy necks, and the black paddles at work beneath the grey-barred flanks. Now you have them in hand—an assured triumph; you will gather a score if you keep cool, calculating, and attentive to the following humble advice right up to the supreme moment when the lanyard is pulled; but, believe me, not a bird will you get if once the natural anxiety of the moment is allowed to gain the ascendant.

The chance has been hardly earned—you have worked for it for a week; let us try to make the most of it. Remember, first of all, that the aiming of a punt-gun is as precise an art as the aiming of a rifle—nay, more; since, to secure the *best possible* result—that is, to place the centre of the charge on the right spot and at precisely the right moment—it involves, besides the mere laying on of the gun, the further and all-important considerations of distance-judgment and the "timing of the shot."

All this, I know, is directly contrary to much that has been written by superficial authors who have never killed a wild goose or fired a punt-gun in their lives, and who seem to imagine that the use of large guns is a sort of "murder made easy"—that you have only to pull trigger and gather a boat-load of fowl. If, therefore, my pupil is prepared to follow me, he must, discard several acres of claptrap of the nature alluded to.

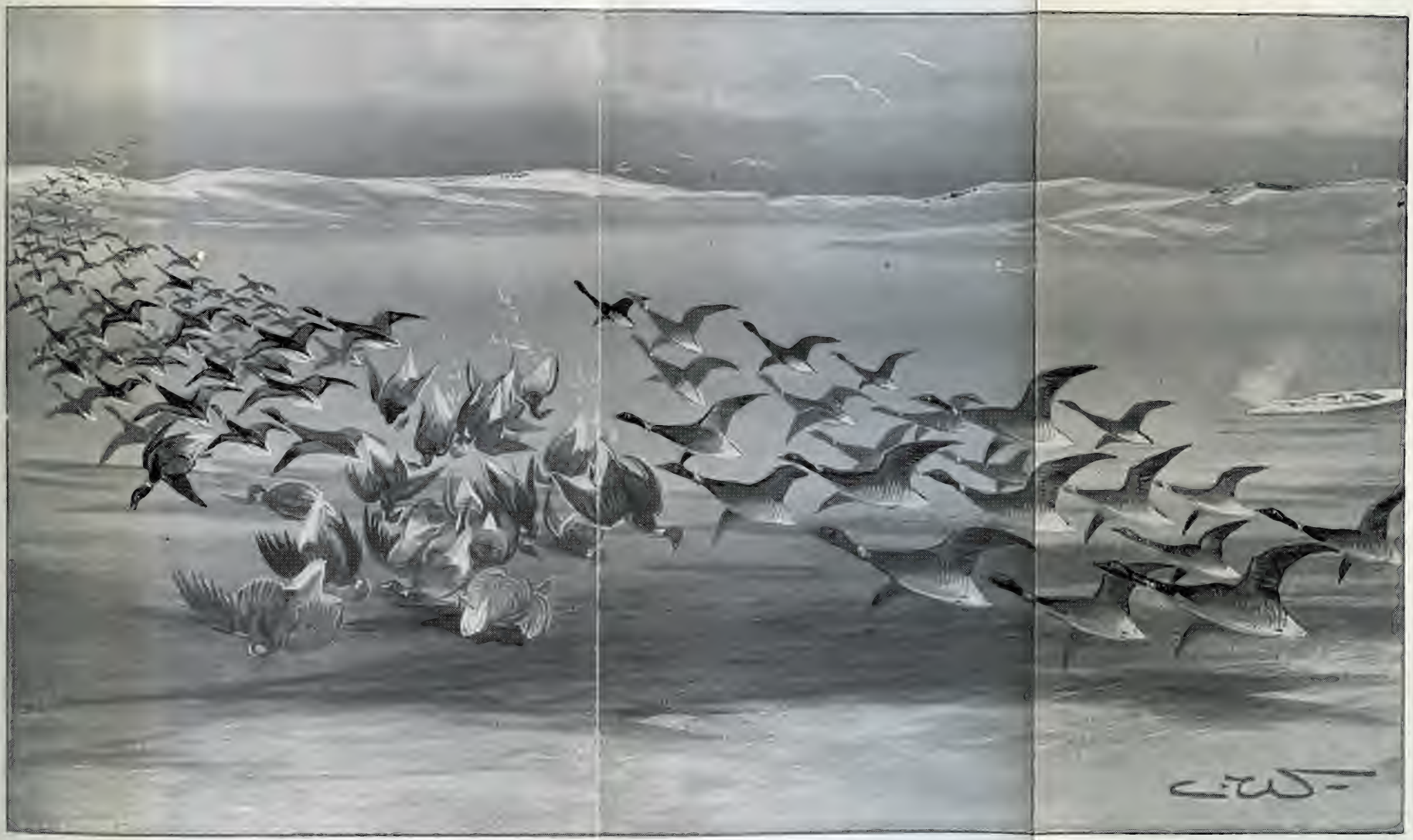
A few words now on the handling of the stanchion-gun. A sitting shot is, of course, the simplest and most easy. Such shots are, as a rule, taken at *ducks*, as described, and for the reasons given, in the last chapter. But, even when firing thus, the gun must necessarily be laid on in the same accurate manner as a rifle. See that both "sights" bear precisely—if at 100 yards, or in rough water, then on or just over the heads of the fowl; if at 60, low on the line of their bodies.

Geese, however, require different treatment to ducks, since they rise, by comparison, slowly and horizontally; while ducks, if alarmed, spin up fast and vertically. A sitting shot at geese, it may be remarked in passing, is, nine times out of ten, a mistake—a downright blunder should their breasts be towards you. Keep a good elevation on the gun, and hold on *till they rise*, when you will not only have gained so many yards, but will have a far larger target presented as wings spread and bodies clear the sea. But even then it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of good distance-judgment and careful "timing" of the shot. Fire one moment too soon, and you may perhaps see two or three of the highest-flying birds fall back through the rising ranks below—the bulk of your charge having passed clean above these last! You have *all but* missed them entirely. On the other hand, should you delay pulling a second too long, or have under-estimated the range, the whole charge will assuredly pass harmlessly beneath them, but precisely where they *were* thickest the moment before.

Now, having cleared the way by these preliminary remarks, let us return to our young friend whom we left, a few paragraphs ago, at that critical moment, when, for the first time in his life, he at length finds himself *well within shot* of a good gaggle of Brent geese. On the dancing blue of the sea he can now

clearly distinguish their sprightly forms, and even the colours of their plumage; he has estimated the range (rightly) at 80 yards, yet he keeps his gun (wisely) at full elevation. That is, we will say (since the "set" of all guns varies), that *his*, he knows, will place the centre of her charge, at that range, some 15ft. above sea level. Now the geese are up —with a sonorous roar of a thousand wings the whole host has risen. Assuming that he remains cool and perfect master of his nerves, he may keep his head low, his eye running along the sights, awaiting the moment when the topmost ranks shall have risen clear of the long barrel. If he has done all this correctly, as instructed, *and pulls at the same moment*, his triumph is assured. Through the smoke he will see an open lane cut through their densest ranks, and a score of geese will splash down, like a shower of dusky angels, headlong upon the glancing waves. First look out for "droppers;" then it only remains to shove in hard and polish off every bird that can swim, right and left, with the cripple-stopper. If, on the other hand, he cannot depend on his coolness and self-control, he must rely on the less precise method of eye-judgment, or the still more haphazard system of counting three—or five, according to distance—before despatching his charge.

To avoid the possible imputation of egotism, let me disclaim any personal pretension to extraordinary



By Chas. Whymper.

A BIG SHOT AT BRENT GEESE.

skill or infallibility in handling the punt-gun, such as I would fain strive to impart to the tyro. Far from it: since these rough deductions are based quite as much, or probably more, on lessons taught by bungles and blunders than on the rarer joys of perfect success; but, at least, the lessons have been learnt in the dear school of experience. To understand thoroughly, or even perfectly, a given subject, and to be able to carry that knowledge into practice, are things not necessarily identical.

One example will serve to drive home both arguments. For several days we had stuck to the geese; again and again we had punted in, sailed in, tried all we knew to coax them, but in vain. Not once had we gained the deadly distance or fired a shot; when, late one afternoon, while we were busy with a little bunch of six, the whole host was seen winging their way towards us. Hard by those six, after innumerable wheels which serried the western skies, they pitched not 300 yards away. In ten seconds we were within shot; but none rose. "Take them sitting," presently whispered W., and, foolishly acting on *bad advice*, I was in the act of drawing in the elevator (but had not done so) when they rose, and I fired *far too quick*, forgetting at the moment that the geese were too near for the high elevation. The result was that the shot passed clean over the heads of all the nearer masses, and, instead of a "big shot," only three lay prostrate in a

long line, the nearest 120 yards away, the farthest perhaps double that. I make a "clean breast" of that atrocious blunder, solely in the hope that it may prevent similar calamities to others. But the bitter memory is still kept ever green by "Wull," who, unmindful of Horatian philosophy, habitually persists in recalling hours not serene, and at least thrice each winter begins, "D'ye mind that night off the Greenwath Gut?" Then, when I have reminded him that "what's hit is history, what's missed is mystery," and relations are becoming strained, he adds as an emollient, "Eh, mon! but yon farthest geese *was* a long shot!" He is a decent fellow, Black Wull, and an excellent puntsman, otherwise I fear there must ere now have been bloodshed.

Such chances as that above mentioned are quite exceptional, but in wildfowling the apparently incredible does occasionally happen—perhaps thrice in a lifetime—when it actually becomes necessary to put up even those gun-shy geese before firing, or, better, to instruct your puntsman to put them up by striking a scull on the boat's quarter. If you have had the presence of mind on such rare occasion to do this, you will not then be likely to forget to give the geese time to rise to the gun.

Brent geese, at a distance, present a dark appearance—like a black line ruled on the sea. On nearer approach the lighter colours become visible among the dark, while recurring white spots, which

appear and disappear, break the line. These are caused by white sterns standing upright for a moment, while necks are craned down under water in search of food. But when seen on the dry or standing against a dark background of mud, these geese often show quite light-coloured, especially when viewed away from the sun. In certain lights they may easily be mistaken for a crowd of gulls sitting on the shore.

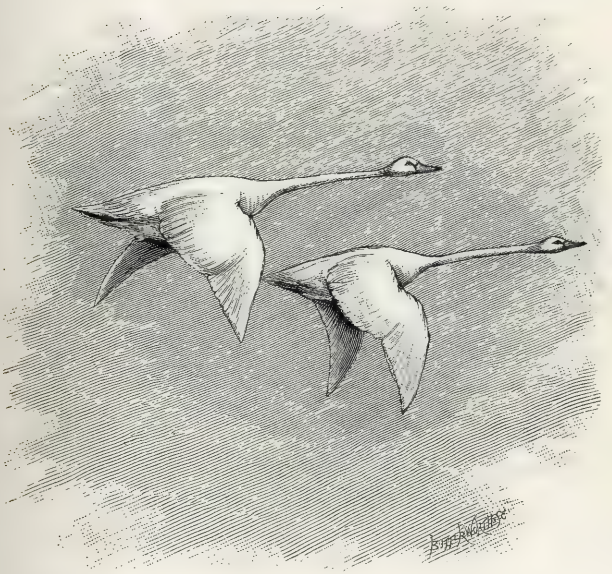
These geese are the latest to arrive of all our winter wildfowl. The average date of their appearance in force (on the N.E. coast) falls after Christmas. Though stragglers may come in November, one cannot rely on having them here in numbers before January, and in some seasons much later. Thus during the present winter the chief arrival occurred in the second week of February; and in the memorable season of 1886 we had very few till as late as March 1, when they came in quite unprecedented numbers, as I have elsewhere described. An excellent general index of their abundance or scarcity on our coast is afforded by the state of the ice in the Sound at Copenhagen and in the Cattegat, which information is daily reported at that season in the shipping newspapers.

There is another and an unsportsmanlike manner of shooting Brent geese, to which I have referred in terms of unqualified condemnation, in a previous chapter (*see* p. 67 *et seq.*). I need not further allude

to it here, except to remark that, on waters where this pot-hunting, amateur-poulterer-at-half-a-crown-a-brace sort of "sport" is carried on, the difficulties of the legitimate gunner are increased tenfold, and it becomes well-nigh impossible to make a fair shot. One such unscrupulous charlatan is enough to ruin a large estuary, to injure the sport of all the others, and, after all, he will get next to nothing himself.

The directions above given for shooting geese, apply also generally to swans. These birds rise even more slowly than geese, often beating the water for some yards with their quills ere they are fairly clear and under way. But this is not always the case. Their tardiness in getting on to wing has sometimes been exaggerated, since, when they are sitting ashore or in shallow water, where their feet can get a purchase on the ground, swans can launch themselves into air without touching the surface at all. Hence, in such cases, there is but little time to adjust the aim of a punt-gun *after* they have risen. Again, since swans are never found in such numbers as geese, but usually in little bunches of three or four up to a dozen together, they never present so extensive a target as their more numerous cousins. A sitting shot is therefore more often taken, and, should three or four swans group themselves nicely together at the critical moment, the certainty thus offered is to be preferred to the

risk of afterwards possibly getting an even better chance when on the wing. I have some further notes on these noble-looking wild-fowl; but space is exhausted now, and perhaps we may go afloat again.



WHOOPERS.

CHAPTER IX.

ON WILD GEESE AND SWANS (*Continued*),

WITH REMARKS ON HARD WEATHER AND ITS EFFECTS ON FOWL.

THOUGH largest and most imposing of wildfowl, the wild swan does not therefore occupy a first place in the fowler's estimation; on the contrary, our noble friend must rank far below the ducks and geese. There is, nevertheless, a very general impression current among ordinary mortals—not wildfowlers—that to bag a wild swan is the climax of the gunner's art, his highest proof of skill: while to secure half a dozen at a shot is deemed worthy of heavy headlines and a flaming paragraph in the local paper. But in practice the monarch of the flood is not so highly rated. His appearances on our coast are altogether too casual, he is too much of a come-by-chance, and, moreover (differing in this respect from geese), wild swans, on first arrival, are often a comparatively easy prey to the fowler who first espies them. Hence—putting aside the natural temptation to a novice to secure so noble a trophy—there is but little enthusiasm evoked by the advent

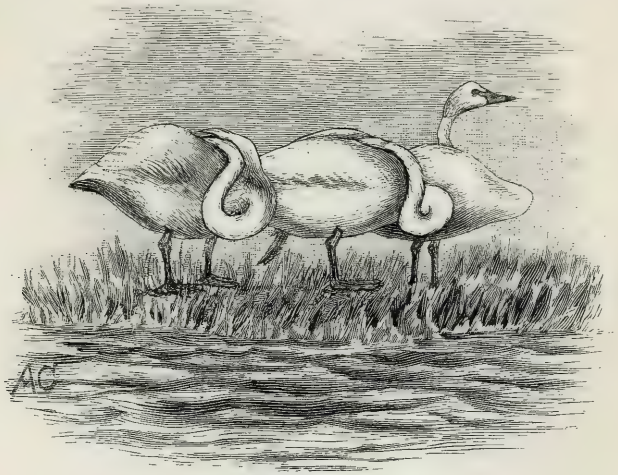
of a small herd of swans within the domains of the punt-gunner.

Wild swans seldom appear here save when the winter is exceptionally severe beyond the North Sea. I mentioned the state of the ice in the Sound and Cattegat as affording a ready index to the probable influx of geese to our coasts; and the remark applies with even greater force to the advent of swans, since —even in mildest seasons—we always have *some* geese; while it is hardly too much to say that, until the last broads and sounds of the Continent are all fast frozen, no swans will come here at all. Note, that it is not the state of the weather or temperature *here* (except in so far as it may be a reflex of what is happening abroad) that brings over these hyperborean fowl—such as Brent geese and swans—but solely the continental conditions.

So, when swans do come, it is, for the same reasons, certain that they will have been preceded by a vastly greater influx of geese and other birds which fully occupy the gunner's attention. He has also, at such times, nearly all the inland wildfowl, driven down to the tide by the severity of the weather; and is indisposed, amidst plenty, to risk the probable big shot he has long been praying for, for the chance of securing two or three of the five swans that have turned up on the flats—that is, again excepting the case of the young fowler who is all anxiety to shoot his first wild swan, even though

he thereby sacrifices the best opportunity for "making a bag" he may enjoy for years—for such chances come but once or twice in a decade.

Illustrative of this point, I may mention that, during the two biggest "swan seasons" that we have had of recent years—viz., 1892 and the present winter (1894-5)—I only twice fired at swans during the first-named year, and never once during this,



WILD SWANS—MIDDAY.

though we had them in sight almost every day we were afloat.

So irregular are the appearances of swans on our coast, that they give the fowler scant opportunity intimately to investigate their habits—a difficulty which is enhanced by the fact that no sooner are swans seen than they are either shot themselves, or

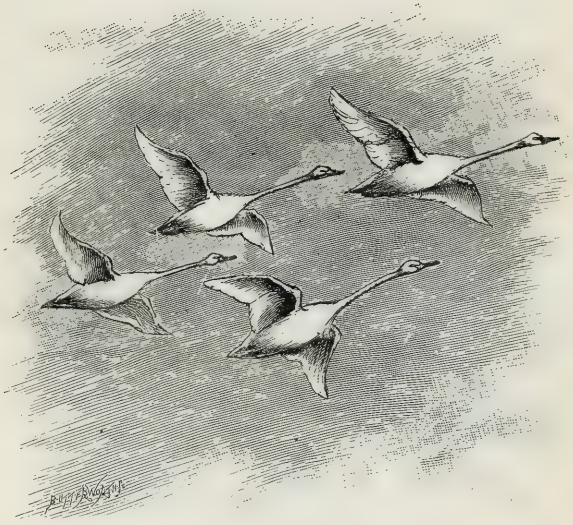
disturbed by the gunner who prefers a shot at other fowl hard by. So far as I have enjoyed opportunities of observing them—and I have watched them, on some occasions, for hours—their normal mode of life appears to be as follows: Swans feed (like geese) morning and evening, and rest quiescent (all but a single sentry) for some hours at midday, the majority squatting flat on their breasts on the mud, with heads buried under the back feathers, and long necks curved gracefully around the breast and over the shoulders, as is here depicted. But (unlike geese) they are quite content, if undisturbed, to remain "inside" at night, roosting on the flats, afloat or ashore, according to tide.

Preferring to feed afloat, in water where their long necks just enable them to reach down to the bottom, swans are never seen to graze, as geese do, ashore. As soon as they take the ground, or the tide ebbs, they cease feeding, and sit or squat on their breasts as described. They would, I imagine, always prefer fresh-water grasses to any marine products were the former available.

When seen on the wing, swans may be distinguished, up to any distance at which they are visible, by their flight, which differs from that of all other waterfowl. Though rapid, it has the appearance of being laboured as the great wings go flap—flap, slowly and deliberately, with regular beats unlike that of any other bird I know, except only

the great bustard. At shorter distance, the long rigid necks are an unmistakable distinction, and the black feet are also seen stretched backwards beneath the tail, as shown in the sketch.

On approaching swans, the fowler will at once recognise the whooper by the clarion note of the sentry—hoop, hoop—clear-toned as the call of the



WILD SWANS—ON THE WING.

cuckoo. But should a single swan, on being alarmed, instead of flying, elect to swim silently away (in which case he can paddle at double the utmost speed of your punt), your suspicions may be at once aroused. And should you still persevere in this stern-chase and match the power of a single biceps

against twin-screws, you may be pretty sure that, when empunted, your swan will prove to be Cygnus olor—that is, the tame species, instead of the true-bred whooper from the Arctic zone. The risk of such mischance is apt to disincline one from undergoing the certainty of much hard labour, and the loss of, say, two valuable hours spent in "working-in" to swans which may not, after all, prove to be of the true wild breed.

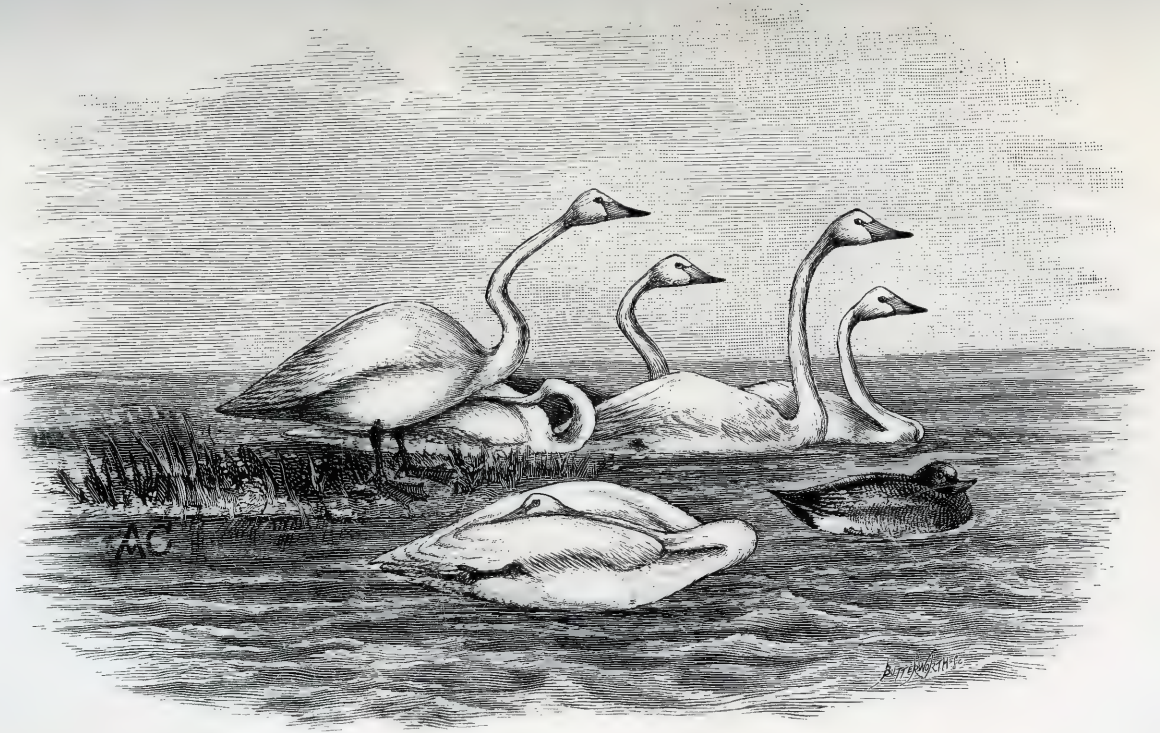
The difference, however, between tame swans and wild swans of both species (though in Bewick's swan less so) is well defined, and, with a good glass, conspicuous at a great distance. The wild swans always swim flat and low, with necks rigid and erect, while their *heads* are unmistakable. These are curiously triangular, the yellow "cere" of the beak running up in bold sweep to a distinct apex at the crown, whereas the mute swan of our ponds and rivers has a big black knob at base of bill, and a *rounded outline* of head, very different from the *triangular* head of the whooper. I give a rough sketch overleaf, illustrating this feature. It is, however, right to add that the mute swan also exists in a state of nature, breeding in a purely wild state no further away than Sweden, and that, therefore—to use an oxymoron—some of the "tame" swans may yet be wild.

I would here correct a very prevalent misconception held on the coast—that *grey* swans are

necessarily tame birds. The cygnets of nearly all swans, tame or wild, are grey during their first winter at least, and some probably longer.*

But although wild swans may not count much in the coast-fowler's idea, nor form an important component in his game-list, yet they must always be associated in his memory with the utmost rigour of Arctic weather, and with some of the grandest glacial scenes that our islands can afford. When the whole land is deep buried in snow, when the frost has held for weeks and the thermometer still keeps falling, then over miles of tidal foreshores—over thousands of acres that lie beyond the range of ordinary tides—there accumulate vast fields of ice and frozen snow; along the full-sea mark lies a rugged ice barrier of crystallised masses all disrupted and piled up, block upon block, in fantastic forms like miniature icebergs, here a nicely-balanced pyramid, there a more solid structure that, at a distance, when enveloped in newly-fallen snow, looms large as a house—aye, as a ruined street after an earthquake. Those are hard times for the fowl; for then one half of their feeding-grounds are ice-bound, the rest freezes hard almost ere the receding tide has left it bare, while, on the flood, this intervening space becomes the playground of thousands

* The cygnets of the "Polish" swan would form an exception to this; but the species or variety is so rarely met with here, that it may be left out of consideration.



WILD SWANS AND WIGEON.

SHEWING TRIANGULAR APPEARANCE OF WHOOPER'S HEAD.

of loose ice-blocks careering along on the tideway, grinding and crushing one against another in whirling tumult.

It is, however, at spring-tides that the grandest and most impressive scenes are witnessed. For then, with daily increasing range, the sea ever forces into movement more and more of the stranded ice, till at length the whole accumulation is cleft asunder, and set afloat in ten thousand disrupted bergs and ice-floes, all surging forward on the tideway—then, indeed, is presented an Arctic spectacle that few, save the wildfowler, can ever realise. Then, amidst that wild and wintry scene, the majestic forms of the wild swans, pure in tone as the ice and snow amidst which they float, seem truly appropriate and in harmony with the spirit of the hour.

Watch the afternoon flood as it sweeps in around the three-mile length of the "Seal-seat braes." Not for ten days past, not since the frost set in—and set in with a two days' snowstorm—have those sand-banks been submerged by the weak neap-tides, held back by a westerly gale. Now the accumulation of ice, and frozen snow cohesive as ice, may be reckoned at twice ten thousand tons and the full flood of spring-tide will set the whole in movement and afford a wondrous sight. Listen; already you hear a hollow rumbling roar as opposing forces begin to act. Alternately it resounds con-

tinuous or intermittent as submerged blocks wrestle and grind in the grip of nature's hydraulics and ice-fields split and cleave under the stress of the racing flood, or heave themselves upwards, towering, for some moments, sidelong in the air, to fall back with sonorous crash upon the stranded ice beyond.

In another hour every acre of that ice will have been set afloat; a few minutes later, and it will all be hurrying seawards in headlong torrent—then woe betide the wildfowler who is caught by the ice on the ebb. It is sheer madness even now, believe me, with an hour's flood to run, to dream of "going in" to where those swans sit, true monarchs of an Arctic scene, on a grounded ice-sheet full a mile away. But there is just time (and none to spare), to try that nearer gaggle of geese that look so black and so tempting amidst their frozen surroundings. But be prudent. Remember that to venture among moving ice in so frail a craft as a gunning-punt is reckless and foolhardy work. Rightly or wrongly, most men value their own lives highly; the rest should at least bear in mind the trouble their headstrong acts may entail in calling together coroners and juries only to return the obvious verdict, "Served him right."

And on that ebb, at dusk, another rare spectacle may be seen; but watch it from some point of vantage ashore. Down seawards there drifts, amidst the floating ice-pack, a whole army of wildfowl,

PUNT-GUNNING IN DRIFT ICE.

By Chas. Whymper.

THE WILDFOWLER'S GRAND OPPORTUNITY, ON THE BREAK UP OF A THREE-WEEKS' FROST.

many guzzling on the abundance of drift-weed that has been torn away by those disrupted floes. Hundreds, nay thousands, of geese, mallards, and wigeon drift leisurely along, some afloat on ice-cakes, and others swimming in the open spaces between, but these last ever ready to lift on wing when a collision is imminent. Three swans sit among the geese on a big ice-sheet, a fourth huge old bird preferring to share a frozen islet with six wigeon. For nearly two miles extends this singular procession—birds and ice; ice and birds—but no punt dare venture among those turbulent masses, and the birds know it.

Next day, albeit the temperature remains hard by zero, there is no ice on the flats. The spring tides have cleared it all out to sea. But, should the frost hold, a fresh accumulation will at once begin as the tides take off.

It is at such times as these that the fowler reaps his harvest. Now he has every variety of British wildfowl within his ken. There are geese and swans, as we have seen. The night-feeding ducks must also perforce abide inshore by day, since they dare no longer risk feeding in the dark amidst that rush of surging floes. Then he has, on the tide, the whole inland stock of wildfowl from several counties around—mallards and golden-eye these are chiefly, together with an odd bunch of pochard, teal, or tufted ducks. Some of these, after a fortnight's

ice, are losing condition, and become far less inaccessible than heretofore. So, also, do the curlews, oyster-catchers, and sheld-ducks, the scaup, and other foreign-going fowl.

The fowler has them, I said, within his ken, but he has more. For once he has them—now, at least, more than at any other time—within his power. As regards the frozen-out wildfowl from inland, it is not too much to say that few would ever return from their enforced coast trip, were it not for a variety of new conditions which these exceptional seasons bring into play in coast-gunning. Many of these new conditions make for safety—since there is safety in numbers—and prove the salvation of the beleaguered fowl. The season is exceptional, the conditions exceptional, and the gunner's ambitions (or greed) are based on a proportionately higher scale. What fowler will now fire his big gun at a dozen or a score of frozen-out mallards when his mind is ever feasting on the hope of making a record shot at geese—of realising the long-deferred aspirations of a decade? These mallards, moreover, are widely scattered, feeding for all they are worth, to pick up during the day a bare sustenance that, at normal times, they could glean in an hour at night. This is their safeguard. The swans benefit similarly. Last night, on the ebb, our rival had them all within eighty yards, but declined the offer in hopes of making a heavy shot at brent,

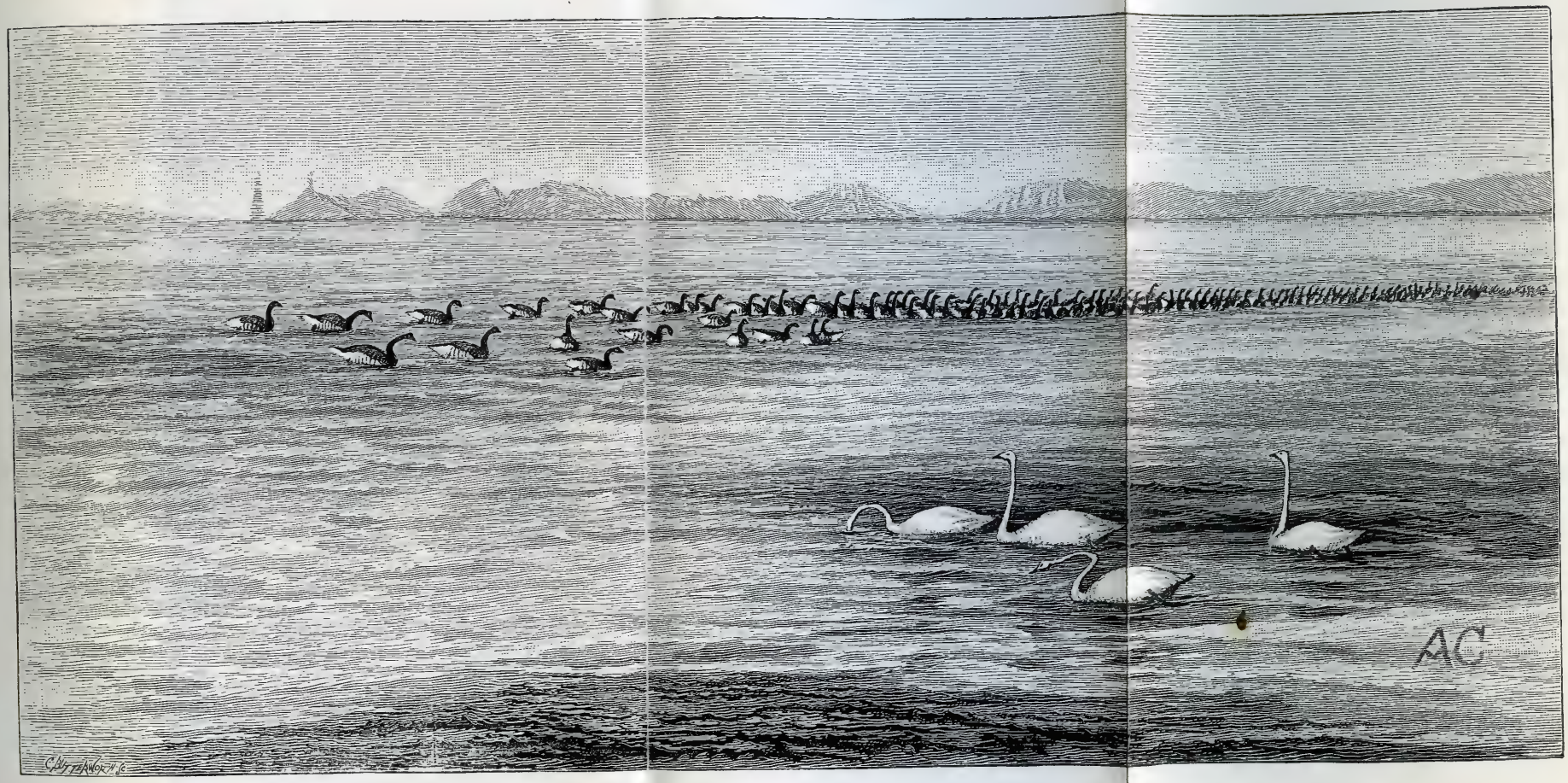
which latter nevertheless went to sea without loss. To-day we had to choose between five swans (well grouped), fifty ducks (all scattered), and five hundred geese (densely massed), and, of course, selected the last named. The accompanying sketch ("Wild-fowling Afloat") rudely illustrates a similar case of *embarras de choix*. Next day the swans are gone—not one has been killed, since everyone has declined their two-pair offer. But they are not offended, and will remember the good times they enjoyed on British waters. The scaup-ducks and golden-eyes we now pass by, right abeam, within 30 yards, hardly able, in the pressure of business, to afford them even a second glance. But the geese—wherein now lies *their* safeguard? Well, they hardly, even now, require any adventitious aid—they are too utterly wild, too defiant and independent. At the end of a fortnight's hard frost they have not lost one ounce of condition; three weeks scarcely affects them. And if, after that, one does *at last* find the punt creeping in a little—a *very* little, closer to those black battalions, well, surely the fowler who has patiently stuck to them all this time does deserve some final reward for those years of mild winters, for the blank days and long hours of hardship, endurance, and disappointment he has undergone, till now largely in vain.

Such winters occur only at long and irregular intervals. During the last five-and-twenty years

there have not been more than four or five when the frost has been really severe for any appreciable length of time, and merely short snaps of cold, however intense, have no effect on fowl. I remember in February, 1874, the water jugs in the bed-rooms being frozen solid, and split through from top to bottom. Such a thing did not occur again till the present year (February, 1895), though in the interval the frost had often been quite as severe. Thus, among the best years for wildfowl were 1878-79, the first six weeks of 1881, and March, 1886; after which just nine years elapsed before we enjoyed another really favourable season.

Let the young fowler look out keenly for his first hard winter, and make the most of it when it comes. It is these hard winters that are not only the most favourable, but, moreover, the most enjoyable. He need fear no cold, though the thermometer stands 15° below zero, for the severity of the frost kills the wind and rarefies the air.

It is on these keen, calm days of intense frost, with a wintry sun and mirror-like sea, with still, crisp air, high-dried since every particle of moisture has been congealed, that the wildfowler at length revels in the Paradise he has long awaited. His trim craft glides over icy waters which freeze even as they dance and dash in spray over her rounded decks, and form rows of icicles along the elevator and gun-crutch; his eye rests on an arctic picture,



WILDFOWLING AFLOAT—"RIVAL CLAIMANTS."

The gunner has here to choose between three hundred Geese driving in on the flood tide: four Swans feeding down a burn: and forty Mallards on the mud. The latter, however, are not shown, inasmuch as (though in full view of the gunner) they sit directly behind "the artist."

and on a rare scene of wild bird-life foreby. But he *feels no cold*, nor suffers therefrom. The simple exertion of poling or sculling suffices to maintain warmth and circulation—there are neither insensate feet and hands nor tingling toes and ears, such pains as the chill and piercing winds of a "mild winter" assuredly produce. It goes without saying that the fowler is abundantly and suitably clad—plenty of warm flannels, tight-fitting, and long sea-boots: but none of your smart knickerbockers, please, nor tartan hose, with neat gaiters and tan shoes, an abomination aboard a gunning-punt, suggestive of present colds, and of rheumatism in years to come. If you wish to be extra luxurious, you may take an armful of dry oat-straw to lie upon; it makes an uncommonly warm and grateful nest, should you happen to have to lie, "waiting-on" for the tide, and anchored for a couple of hours between two icebergs. But I remember, the first time I introduced this innovation, my companion inquiring, somewhat contemptuously, if I was not "a sort of hothouse plant."

The only actual risk that I know of is frost-bite, which specially attacks any injured part—as a jammed foot or finger. It should be guarded against, as far as possible, by leaving no unnecessary part exposed to the air; but should hands or face show signs of "chapping," they may be rubbed at night with glycerine, which removes inflammation.

A curious experience befel me during the present winter. In January, as before mentioned, I was in the sunny south, busy with ducks and grey geese in Spain, where the heat of the midday sun, even in winter, speedily scorches off an outer epidermis. Three weeks later (in February) I was back among the brents and 40° of frost on our own N.E. coast; the result was that the sun-weakened skin cracked all over like thin ice, and on the third day even ordinary ablutions became painful, if not impossible. It should, however, be added that different constitutions vary greatly in their liability to take "chills." Those who have any tendency to weakness in the abdominal region must use special care, or serious results may ensue from prolonged exposure.

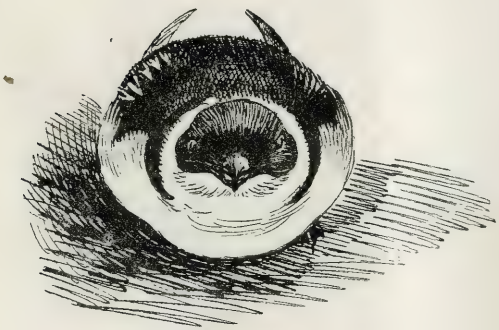
Wild swans rarely remain long on our coast after the frost has disappeared. Yet I have been told by fishermen that, while following their employment off the N.E. coast, they have frequently observed very large herds (numbering from sixty to one hundred and twenty at a time) passing north during the month of May, and *once* in June. I do not doubt their accuracy, and the circumstance seems worth recording.

The Brent geese depart at the end of March or early in April, according to the climatic conditions on the other side, with which they are always intimately acquainted, though how birds ascertain these facts—quite as quickly as we do, with all our

submarine cables, &c.—is a mystery. I will relate an instance in point. In January, 1893, eight wild swans (whoopers) took up their quarters on some marshy land known as Boldon Flats, midway between the big towns of Newcastle and Sunderland, and, being undisturbed, soon became quite tame, though frequent trains passed along the railway within a few hundred yards. Discussions arose in the newspapers as to whether the swans were really wild or tame birds, and it was reported that the keeper of a Yorkshire nobleman had been sent to recapture them as escaped from his ponds. A local paper did me the honour to send a representative to ask my opinion, when I told him that the swans were wild, and that they would shortly know it by this sign—that within twenty-four hours of the first steamer entering Copenhagen (which was then closed by ice) the swans would disappear. Three weeks later this prophecy was fulfilled to the letter, for on Thursday, March 2, the ice broke up in the Sound, on Friday we learned by telegram that the port of Copenhagen was open, and before Saturday morning, March 4, the swans had gone.

On leaving our coast in March, the geese always steer a course east, or a trifle south of east, for they have still two months to spend on Continental waters (in Holland, Denmark, and the Baltic) before they are due to proceed northwards to breed in Spitsbergen in June. I once chanced to see them,

thousands strong, on passage, off the Norwegian coast on May 27, and later, in July and August, have visited them, and the pink-footed geese as well, in their furthest arctic retreat. I should have liked to write something of the summer lives and habits of my old friends up in these remote regions of thick-ribbed ice, where their companions (instead of punt-gunners) are reindeer, arctic foxes, and polar bears; but it is hardly pertinent to our present purpose.



FROM SPITSBERGEN.

CHAPTER X.

ON GREY GEESE.

THE GREY GEESE may be expected to arrive on British soil soon after harvest—about mid-October—what time they have received notice by their own subtle system of telegraphy (avian, *nec* submarine) that British stubbles are cleared and ready for their reception. These "harvest geese" disappear as soon as the stubbles are ploughed—whither bound I know not—but are replaced during winter by fresh arrivals of geese which spend that season here, and, during March, keep receiving constant accessions to their numbers until the final departure northward of all grey geese during April.

Whether the large October geese are greylags or not I have never been able definitely to ascertain. Their sojourn here precisely agrees in date with the period when, if ever, we might expect that species in England; for they leave their islets of the Norwegian Skjærgaard about the end of September, and next turn up—that is, in my, perhaps too restricted, purview—in Spanish "marismas" towards the close of November. Against this hypothesis are the chances

that the Norsk-bred geese may winter in north continental lands: and, secondly, the fact that we have never killed, or known to be killed, a single greylag goose, during more than twenty years' wildfowling on the Eastern coast. That fact, however, by no means proves that the greylag does not come here—and come regularly and in numbers, too—as I will presently show. The grey geese that are killed *in winter*, on this coast, are chiefly pink-footed, together with some of the bean geese. The white-fronted species also occurs, but less commonly than the two above named; while on Sept. 16, 1886, my brother Alfred shot in Northumberland the only known British-killed example of the smaller *Anser erythropus* of Linnæus, as recorded by Mr. Howard Saunders in his invaluable "Manual of British Birds," though with inexorable sternness (and justice combined) that author refuses to accord to the variety full specific rank.

So much for grey geese from a naturalist's point of view; now let us look at them with a coast-gunner's eye. And in that light they may at once be condemned as the most tantalising and the least satisfactory of all the wildfowl race. For, though during six months out of the twelve, they may frequently be seen, they are almost invariably passing high overhead in their V-shaped skeins, and rarely—very rarely—alight anywhere in his domain of mud-flat and shallow. There are, I know, certain

localities to which this remark would hardly apply, since grey geese *are* shot by punt-gunners on two or three broad, exposed estuaries to which they resort to roost at night. But such cases form the exception. The grey geese, as a rule, both feed and roost inland—or, at least, ashore; and on the rarer occasions when, for rest, refuge, or a night's lodging, they do come down to the tidal area, they are specially careful to pitch on some desolate sand-bar or broad spit where no tide flows within half a mile, and where no punt can approach, save, perhaps, once a month on the very best of the spring-tides, as shown at p. 160.

The fact will thus be evident that it is, at least, conceivably possible for several hundred greylags to spend a month or six weeks on our coast, in immediate proximity to punt-gunners, without a single specimen being procured. For several seasons we have tried all we know to obtain a shot or two at the big "harvest geese" above mentioned, but always in vain. Night after night they have come clanging down at dusk from the stubbled plain to their roosting haunts on those wide brown sands, and we have patiently watched the growing tides creeping ever nearer and nearer to their position. But the result has always been the same. When the full influence of the autumn moon was at its height, and the sea strove its utmost to pass the allotted barrier: when every bank save that

on which they usually sat was submerged yards deep, then—either the geese did not come at all that night, or, if some had flown in earlier, they took care to depart in the gloom when the first thin film of salt water touched their toes; that is, while the slowly advancing punt was yet 200 yards away. And at that distance, though they loom up tall as a regiment of dragoons, no punt-gun will kill a greylag goose. During the last year or two, the geese seem to have abandoned that particular part of the coast altogether.

Very rarely are these geese at fault. They know too much, and have reckoned out in detail every danger that threatens, with its varying degrees, and every point that assures safety. Yet once, just before dawn, when a sudden easterly gale had forced up a neap-tide to quite an unusual height, we caught a company of pink-feet still napping on a dry sandbed, not eighty yards from the gun. That sandbed, they had the full authority of the calendar to assume, would never leave them that night within at least two gunshots of punt-bearing waters. It was the sudden gale alone, holding up the tide, that upset their calculations. On another occasion, when poling homewards after dark, on a big North British firth—altogether too broad and exposed a water to be safe for punt-gunning—about a score of geese (probably disturbed elsewhere) flew close past, and pitched on a mussel-scaup almost under the very

"IN THE GREY DAWN."

muzzle. Fortunately, the fowlers had heard their chorus afar and were lying down in good time; then little remained but to draw in the elevator, and to pull trigger. Eight big bean-geese lay dead, and at least two winged birds escaped in the darkness; for it was not safe to follow in deep water, though the clucking of the cripples could be heard hard by.

At odd times, when punting year after year, one does, of course, meet, now and then, with such stray chances to bag even the grey goose—and, for that matter, every other bird or beast in a district. Thus, a little bunch of three or four of these geese may sometimes elect to pitch—and thus offer a chance—where a company of them would probably have passed on; again, on a lucky morning at daybreak, one such company, while so passing, flew well within range of a punt lying hidden in a creek, "waiting on" for some wigeon to drift in with the tide. The result was that a "tipped shot," well directed, knocked down five pink-footed geese weighing 34lb., though, by the "souse" they made in the sea, one might have put their avoirdupois at half a ton.

All these incidents cited, however, represent but mere casualties—lucky accidents, like finding a £5 note fluttering along the pavement, or a woodcock on the autumn heather. They cannot be taken into account at all in the regular pursuit of sport; and I have narrated them merely as showing that there is no

regular system on which these geese can be pursued on salt water: or, if there is, neither I nor any fowler I ever met on our coast has yet discovered it.

Inland it is a totally different matter. There, in those localities which are frequented by them, the grey goose is a grand sporting bird, well worthy of the wildfowler's best attentions, and as difficult to secure as can be desired.

Inland shooting is, of course, a matter which does not concern the coast-fowler purely as such, since the moment the geese pass beyond full-sea mark they are on private, and therefore preserved lands, which are to him forbidden ground. But I need not for that reason pass by the subject entirely. Several records of big bags of grey geese made inland in Norfolk and Gloucestershire are given in the Badminton Library ("Shooting," ii., pp. 235-7), but, beyond mere numbers and names, not a word is said as to the system adopted—a bald style of description that is not confined to the instance in question. Do not let me appear to write disparagingly of the Badminton series, to one section of which ("Big Game Shooting") I am proud to be a humble contributor. It is only in comparison with the high standard of the rest of that excellent work that I venture to regard the wildfowling section as inadequate—scarcely worthy either of its theme or of the Badminton series. The technical details as to measurements of punts, punt guns, &c., with the

descriptions of ordinary coast-fowling, are all right, but as to the rest—well, stick to Hawker.

It has never been my luck to shoot on any land regularly frequented by grey geese—never, that is, in England; but in various foreign countries I have enjoyed their exciting society to the full, and perhaps some notes, though made abroad, may be acceptable to the young fowler, and prove applicable to goose-frequented spots at home. These geese have always been specially abundant in the Lothians and other eastern Scottish counties; also in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk &c., as well as over a great part of Ireland.

In Scandinavia, in August and September, the geese are obtained both by flight-shooting in the ordinary way and by a species of driving—or rather by moving them, having previously placed the guns either on their probable line of flight, or at their next alighting haunt. This is, of course, more or less precarious work; I have not heard of large numbers ever being secured in a day, and the geese all go south before the end of September. To Spain, in winter, they resort in vast numbers from November to the end of February, and in certain districts, (all, I need hardly say, preserved) afford right royal sport. On one of these vast marshes, in the sporting tenure of which it is my good fortune to be a partner, the grey geese abound and, in favourable seasons, considerable numbers come to bag—or, to speak

correctly, to *mule-pannier*, since no "bag" will carry many of such ponderous fowl. These favourable seasons are, however, most uncertain and irregular, dependent on the rainfall, dry years being best—in wet winters hardly any geese are got. Having already given details in "Wild Spain" (by Walter Buck and myself), I will here confine myself to a single record of wild-goose shooting which, for shoulder guns, will probably seldom be surpassed. The season in question was *most* favourable, not a drop of rain having fallen until the shooting opened at the end of November; hence the fowl were congregated round the few spots where moisture lingered. There were nine or ten guns distributed over some ten miles of marsh; the best day produced eighty-one geese, beside upwards of 300 duck; and the week's shooting (four days), 247 geese and 713 duck, all killed at flight. Such results, however, it will be understood, are, in the case of geese, quite exceptional. As regards species, those shot in Spain are nearly all greylags, with a few bean-geese. The latter "flight" separately, in small lots of two or three to half a dozen together. We have shot no other species there.

The geese, on these marshy plains, spend the night on open waters, and "flight" morning and evening. The shooting is done from sunken tubs placed at the spots to which the geese resort at daybreak; for, in average seasons, the one hour at

sunrise is the best, and probably the only chance they will offer. To reach these spots it may be necessary to ride several miles, galloping in the dark across rough country undermined by badgers, rabbits, and other beasts—nothing that, of course, to foxhunters, but a decided nerve-teaser to those who (like the writer) never bestride a horse except abroad. The result, however, say a dozen or fifteen greylags, scaling 8lb. to 10lb. apiece, and all laid out on their backs before breakfast, for a couple of guns is a sufficient reward.

Three main-points to observe in watching for flighting geese are :—(1) To sit low and keep your head out of sight. (2) To see every bird that flies from the moment when it comes within view—albeit it may be directly behind you! Third, and almost most important, *let the geese come well in.*

The first point may seem too entirely obvious, yet three men out of five neglect it. The man whose eye barely clears the rim of his tub (or butt, or bush, or bank, whatever his ambush may be) will get ten times the chances of his neighbour whose whole head and neck stand upright as a windmill, and whose face, showing pale in the morning light, acts as a veritable danger signal to the fowl. Next, as to seeing objects directly behind you—and in the dark, too! Well, it does sound rather a despotic direction, but, as our friend the Irishman would say, you must get your *ears* to help you. And indeed

the sense of hearing is all-important, but an invaluable auxiliary is a revolving stool, upon which you can swiftly and silently swing round to whatever point a far-away "honk, honk!" in the gloomy skies may call your attention. Then, as to the third point. Again I beg you to let them come well in—as near as ever they will come. Remember that these huge geese, equal in weight and bulk to eagles, and even exceeding them in shot-resisting powers, are very apt to deceive the eye as regards distance; remember also that they are coming in *to alight*, and, on their next wheel, may be at less than half the range. You do not get a shot at greylags every day, so make the most of it, and avoid bitter memories. The man who is patient and lets them come close in, will kill four out of five, and have a dozen fat geese in his tub; whereas the reckless shooter, with twenty or thirty emptied cartridges, can only claim one, or, perchance, two birds down—fallen half a mile away, and which, if recovered at all, will already be "ploated" and half devoured by the kites.

Here is a rough-and-ready "rule of range" with greylag geese. At twenty yards, certain; at thirty, three to one on the gun; at forty, reverse the odds, and beyond that do not fire. I allude to shooting with 12-bore guns, loaded with AAA shot. This is not, I admit, an ideal or a scientific combination, nor precisely what one would select for the work had one an unlimited choice, though I would not, personally,

"BEYOND THE POWER OF MAN."

[GREY GEESE IN THEIR CHOSEN HAUNT.]

go beyond the 10-bore. But it is inconvenient, in remote wild lands, where from the same brake you may start a woodcock or a wild boar, and where you shoot alternately, one day snipe and quail, the next, perhaps, great bustard, or deer, or grey geese, to have guns at hand suitable for each and every possible sort and size of game. The 12-bore Paradox comes as near fulfilling these severe conditions as is mundanely possible. Though admittedly at variance with theory, yet I have seen these 12-bores perform well with mould shot, both for long shots, as at bustard (which are soft), as well as at these ironclad geese at short range. Nothing less than AAA will penetrate their padded cuirass, or make sure and steady work *in the long run*, though of course the smaller sizes may "fluke" an odd bird in head or neck, or occasionally tip a wing.

Here is an illustration of the toughness of the greylag. One morning last January, just as day was breaking, I heard behind my tub a splash as of Niagara. On turning round, some thirty geese were seen swimming on an open pool. The distance did not appear to exceed forty yards, so, after cogitation, I decided to try them, and, having whistled their heads up, planted both barrels of AAA in the thick of their necks. But not a bird stopped, nor even showed the slightest sign of being hit so far as their flight could be watched. The distance, however, as

afterwards stepped, proved to be about ten yards further than was estimated.

When on *flight* these geese travel at tremendous speed, though they *appear* to be going quite slow. At such birds—that is to knock them down clean and smart—a full degree of faith and forward allowance is needed. But discrimination must be used in firing at birds that are already circling and about to alight, when their flight is checked, in which cases only a moderate speed-allowance will be required. They never "bunch up" when fired at, thus offering a family shot for the left (as brents do), but each bird wheels off on his axis, and the second barrel is usually directed at a vanishing line, requiring some care in sighting. Decoy geese made of wood, painted and modelled as nearly as possible to resemble the originals in size, shape, and colour, are sometimes effective in the half light. They should be moored afloat within twenty-five yards of the ambush (which is usually on the water's edge), but must be withdrawn before daylight is fully established, or the deceit will assuredly be detected.

A noteworthy peculiarity in the flight of these geese is their habit of falling with collapsed wings, not unlike a tumbler pigeon, and performing other aerial feats, as teal often do, but which appear strange in the case of such heavy birds as greylag geese.

Now we will quit foreign shores, and make some remarks on the distinguishing features of the four grey geese. On the wing, when seen flying at a distance, or passing high overhead, their species cannot be distinguished; but, when near enough to be seen, the blue wings and shoulders of the greylag—as blue as a cushat—are a safe distinction. In their notes, too, three out of the four closely resemble each other; of these three—greylag, pink-footed, and bean geese—the last, we think (but will not assert), utters a harsher croak, more monosyllabic: whereas the boisterous cachinnation of the white-fronted species, at least on our own few interviews, has always proved a sufficient index. When in hand the specific distinctions of all four are well known, and I need not repeat details which will be found in all ornithological works. But I would remark that the beak of the pink-footed species is a puny little organ, more resembling that of the brent, and in striking contrast to the long and full mandibles of its three congeners. In colour, it is black fore and aft, with a pink band amidships. Also it is worth a passing note that on examining a couple of score of newly-killed greylags, the colours of the "soft parts" were found to vary considerably; the beaks ranging from white or flesh-colour to bright orange, while the legs also graded from the normal flesh-colour to pink—in some cases quite as bright as those of *Anser brachyrhynchus* itself.

If these are simply random variations, they may well puzzle the average sportsman, and, indeed, seem almost to set at nought the value of ornithological definition.

In the north of England we read almost every autumn in the local papers, paragraphs mentioning the flights of wild geese seen winging their way, at that season, across the moors. And it is usually added that "the oldest inhabitant" of the hills, or observant shepherds, are therefrom enabled to predict a severe winter in prospect. Now, when a severe winter does happen to follow, it affords the weather-wise worthies an excellent opportunity (which they do not neglect) of saying "I told you so!" Should, however, that season be mild, we hear nothing further of falsified forecasts. Now seeing that these geese pass southwards over England every autumn on their regular annual migration—(whether their passage happens to fall within the ken of the observant shepherd or not)—it will be pretty obvious that the phenomenon has no more bearing on subsequent climatic conditions than on the digamma, or the Eastern question, or the next general election. Should they, therefore, read this note, I trust that my pastoral friends in the Cheviots will for the future cease to vex their minds with vain auguries.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE DIVING-DUCKS, SEA-DUCKS, AND DIVERS.

WITH DIRECTIONS IN DISTINGUISHING THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF WILDFOWL WHEN SEEN AT A DISTANCE.

To complete a general survey of the birds classed as wildfowl, it is necessary to glance at the group of diving-ducks, which, during winter, afford a certain measure of sport. Owing to their diurnal habits, these ducks (like the geese) are regularly met with by the punt-gunner *by daylight*, during which time the game-ducks are beyond his reach—safe enough on the open sea. Thus in mild seasons when the geese become all but inaccessible, these diving-ducks often afford a welcome variety, and not infrequently serve to avert the calamity of an empty boat.

There are two groups, which may be distinguished as the true sea-ducks and the diving-ducks. The former I will dismiss in a few words, partly because, being strictly denizens of the open sea, they rarely come in the way of the punt-gunner: but chiefly because I have already dealt with them under the head of "Shooting Under Canvas," in Chapter III.

It is only necessary here to add that the sea-ducks include the eider and long-tailed duck, the black and velvet scoters.

Of the diving-ducks the species most commonly met with are the scaup and golden-eye, though the pochard should probably rank as the most valuable and important of his class. The pochard, however, is by no means so regularly distributed along our coasts as seems to be inferred by some writers. Thus, for example, though common elsewhere, on the N.E. coast it is practically unknown. Inland I have often met with pochards, but on salt water can only find three records in wildfowling diaries of over twenty years. The first, killed among some scaups in January, 1881, is already referred to in "Bird-life of the Borders" (p. 220); and on November 17th, 1889, three more were bagged, besides others lost, out of a company of twenty-one, all too scattered to offer a good shot. Lastly, during the recent severe frosts (1895), I was asked by an old and experienced fowler to call at his cottage and name two birds he had shot. They were a red-necked grebe and a *pochard drake!* It will thus be apparent how scarce and irregular are the appearances of the pochard on this coast, a curious circumstance, as, forty years ago, I understand it was fairly common locally, and often obtained both by flighters and punters. While night-punting and lying by the mud-edge, I have on several occasions heard (and twice seen) ducks

whose notes were not familiar (the pochard, by the way, croaks like a carrion crow), and which, I fancied, were pochard. But since one does not care to weather out a long winter's night afloat merely to shoot a "specimen bird" with the shoulder-gun (thereby possibly dissipating one's chance of a good shot at wigeon), the question remained unsolved. As is well-known, the pochard feeds by night, and always prefers fresh water to salt.

The tufted duck, in like manner, is locally unknown, save when, in the hard winters, little bands of them, frozen out of the moorland lochs, come down to the tide. Several were thus obtained last month (February, 1895). I have seen both these species in May and June, and some remain to breed at sequestered spots in the Border-land.

Golden-eye and scaup appear in October, and on first arrival both kinds are fairly accessible to a punt; but whereas the first-named rapidly acquires caution, and becomes by mid-winter one of the wildest of the wild, the scaup, on the other hand, retains his aboriginal simplicity, and may usually be "set to" with tolerable certainty. These ducks are rarely seen in numbers—a dozen up to twenty or thirty together is about the most, but fours and sixes are more usual, in which cases it is sometimes possible to "shove in" quite close, and, waiting till they group themselves nicely, to secure a pair or two with the shoulder-gun.

Golden-eye swim very close together; scaup, on the contrary, rather loose and scattered, but both are among the hardest, toughest, and most unkillable of all the feathered race. To kill them outright —unless almost blown out of the water at half range—is next to impossible, and the fowler should bear this in mind, or the *net* results of his shot will be disappointing. In going up to either of these ducks (since they rise slowly, beating the surface for some yards), the fowler will do well to preserve a good elevation, to keep his gun bearing a little to windward of the thickest part, and to *wait till they rise*, firing (if within long shot) the instant their wings open. A sitting shot, unless very near, or in smooth water, is rarely effective; on rough water, nine times in ten, a total failure. And even should a dozen fall to a well-timed flying shot, quite half the cripples will probably be lost at the moment, do all you can to secure them: so tenacious of life are they, so adept at diving, dodging, and getting away in every direction at once. To assume that these creatures feel pain, in our sense of those words, is an anomaly, and I do not believe it. Though shot through and through, and perhaps with a BB pellet in the head, they continue to dive, striving to get under ice or among weed or sea-tangle; and even when got aboard (having previously received a charge of small shot at fifteen yards) they are by no means dead, and perhaps half an hour later fully alive; while if

GOLDEN-EYES.

A TEAM OF MALLARDS AND FOUR DIVING-DUCKS IN BACKGROUND SHOW THEIR RESPECTIVE APPEARANCE ON THE WING.

caught, winged, in a shallow creek—in which situations I have thrice detected cripples clinging flat on the bottom, though in one case (a wigeon) it was bare sand—I have yet to discover how they can be decently and expeditiously killed.

I would here remark (since the converse has been circumstantially stated) that neither these birds nor any other member of the duck-tribe, including mergansers, ever attempt, in the first instance, to escape by diving. In presence of ascertained danger, they one and all first seek safety in flight; it is only after being disabled that the diving tactics described are resorted to.

Scaup may be distinguished at a distance by the *brown* appearance of their company and by the white "canvas-backs" of the old drakes showing conspicuously among the darker majority—golden-eyes, on the other hand, showing *slate-blue*, and never an old drake to be seen. Moreover, both young and female scaups (which constitute three-fourths of their numbers) carry the clean-cut white foreheads, which feature can be distinguished with a good glass when within 200 yards; and, if flying, the white speculum is seen to extend across the whole wing, whereas in the golden-eyes it is confined to the secondaries. Both these species have short necks, and noticeably bulky heads; but even in this latter feature there is a difference, that of the golden-eye having a *bushy* appearance, while the scaup's

head is heavy and hard in outline, the high crown showing like a boss, and, as just said, three-fourths of them have the white front, which the golden-eyes never have.

Tufted ducks afloat look as black and white as guillemots, and show more white above water-line than any other of the duck-tribe. The young of these (but not all the adult females) are also white-fronted, and both are far less conspicuously coloured than the old drakes (see sketch at p. 174). So far as colour goes, an old pochard drake at a distance may easily be mistaken for a mallard; but the heavy, bulkier outline will serve to distinguish him, even when in certain lights the red head cannot be seen.

I must here hark back a little to keep myself on the safe side regarding the old drake golden-eyes. I said they were never seen—nor are they—with the packs, whether inland or on the tide. I have only records of four, and these all separate birds. At the end of March they turn up on the moorland lochs, remain during April or even into May, and the next I have seen of them is about the first week in June, when they appeared, *paired*, on the fjeld lakes of Norway, then just clearing of ice. Where are the old drakes in the intervals? I know not, and would like to learn. There must be hundreds of them somewhere during winter.

I will now endeavour to set down a few directions for distinguishing, one from another, the various

kinds of wildfowl when seen at a distance, though I well know how difficult it is to reduce to print those fine points which, in many cases, serve to a fowler's practised eye, to differentiate one species from another. In the first place, it must be laid down as an axiom that it is by means of a powerful spy-glass alone that these differences can be discerned afar. When a man assures you he can name at a glance birds seen flying in the distant heavens, agree with him if you like, but never trust such superficial diagnosis. The naked eye cannot be relied on at a distance—even the keenest. It may discriminate between birds and stones or other like inanimate objects on the shore, but that is all, and even then the point is best corroborated by a survey through the glass. The glass, indeed, in all coast-fowling, is an auxiliary of the highest importance. It is an even more reliable friend than the gun itself. The fowler may chance to secure his ten, twenty, or fifty head, possibly a hundred, but he *may* spend a week —aye, a month—without firing a shot, so absolutely dependent is he upon every vicissitude of wind, wave, and weather on those wild sea shores, where alone this sport can be enjoyed. But, though at times the gun may thus prove but useless lumber on board, it is never so with the glass, and full many a fowling trip that would otherwise have been accounted blank has proved, through its aid, a source of infinite pleasure and of lasting memories;

for the fowl are there, though you may not be able to approach them or to snap a shot, and far beyond the range of your gun the binocular will afford pictures of wild bird-life, living pictures of these most beautiful and wildest of all created creatures, secure and unalarmed in their natural homes, that will not soon fade from the mental retina.

The most powerful glass is undoubtedly the long deerstalker's telescope; but such instruments are extremely unhandy in a punt at all times, and practically useless in rough water, when they cannot be held steady owing to the "life" of the craft in a sea. Nor can one, when going in to fowl, attend at once both to the gun and a long spy-glass. A full-powered marine binocular is therefore preferable; but it should not be too heavy, otherwise one cannot steady it with one hand for a final glance when nearly in shot, and when the other hand is fully engaged with the gun.

Here are a few rules for distinguishing the different wildfowl, written as concisely as possible

All ducks seen *ashore*, it may be relied on, are game-ducks; the diving-ducks never go on the ooze, but keep afloat in the creeks, pools, and tide channels.

Mallards can be told from geese, with a good telescope, up to three miles, by their sitting horizontal and so much lower—far more so than geese, which stand high on their legs. When

resting ashore, many mallards are seen to be squatting on their breasts on the mud, with heads tucked back under wings. Geese never sit thus, nor are they ever seen to be asleep or even in postures of repose.

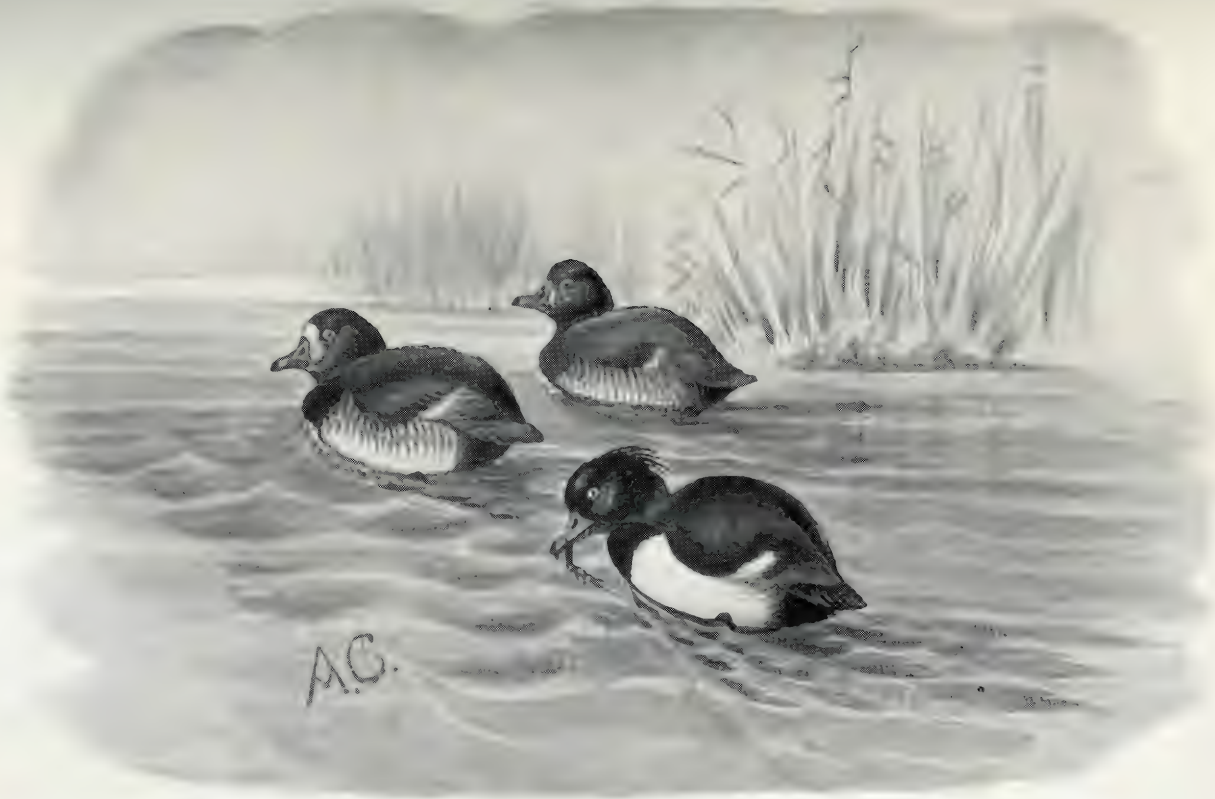
Wigeon, when ashore, also show very low, but they are visibly smaller, slimmer, and more nimble than mallards, whose heavy bills, and thick sinuous necks, puffed out or curled around their breast give them a portly appearance, albeit ever graceful. When afloat, a company of wigeon are recognised because they show dark on the water, whereas mallards have a mottled appearance in general colour, owing to the pearly-grey backs of the drakes.

Sheld-ducks are sometimes found in company with mallard, and, though less sought after, are usually wilder, and thus give notice of danger to the more highly-prized fowl. Their white plumage is conspicuously bright and glossy, easily distinguishable from gulls far beyond the range at which their black heads become visible. Like gulls and all white plumaged birds, sheld-ducks in certain lights present quite a dark appearance, when, by their figures, they are not unlikely to be mistaken for brent geese. Similarly, small gulls sleeping afloat on a grey day, often closely resemble wigeon or duck. The glass, however, in both cases, will undeceive while yet many gunshots away. Gulls floating at a distance may be

known by their buoyant carriage, their sterns sticking up as high as their heads.

Swans also, it goes without saying, are big and white; but they do not always show white. When in sunlight they loom up like Lot's wife; but on dull grey days they are sometimes almost invisible, or may then be taken for grey geese. They are not so conspicuous as, from their bulk, might be expected, owing to their habit of feeding low in creeks and burns of the flats, where they allow themselves to remain stranded on the ebb. Hence as the tide flows, one is sometimes surprised to see it disclose swans in the midst of green oozes that one just previously had swept in vain with the glass.

Should you chance to see a straggling company of fowl swimming in some deep-water channel, watch them for a minute or two with the glass. If they swim long and low on the water, with rakish carriage, and keep diving two or three at a time —never all together—you may know them to be mergansers, and save yourself the labour of a futile pursuit. Scaup and golden-eye are often under water all at once; but the latter (and mergansers too) are certainly capable of recognising the presence of danger while yet submerged—perhaps notice is conveyed below by those on the surface having risen. At any rate the submerged members will then rise direct from the bottom, flying through



TUFTED DUCKS.

water and air without tarrying one instant on the surface.

The goosander is an altogether scarcer bird than the tide-loving merganser, and, moreover, is seldom or never seen on salt water. His haunts are all inland, and especially on the best trout and salmon-streams, where he gulps down troutlets in hundreds, regardless of the 9-inch limit; and in spring, right under the eyes of the water-bailiff (who may not destroy him, except at the risk of a twenty-shilling fine), devours whole hecatombs of salmon smolts and parr, in defiance of all the pains and penalties prescribed by the bye-laws. The smew I have never met with, alive or dead. Then there is the hooded merganser. What shall I say of him? He is a true-born Yankee; but ever since Mr. Folkard, by some inadvertence, included this North American species in his book, appending a specific description which must surely have been evolved from his own inner consciousness—since then each subsequent writer on fowling has apparently considered it necessary to believe that he, too, has met with *Mergus cucullatus* in life. Imperfect ornithological knowledge may possibly be at the root of all this. I remember when "Wildfowler" was writing in the *Field* seventeen years ago, trying to keep him right on this point; but a well-meant endeavour only seemed further to accentuate the mistake with that clever writer, successful fowler, but bad naturalist! I still

remain very far from feeling assured that this American bird has ever appeared in cis-Atlantic waters within the last thirty or forty years. I am open to conviction, but would like to ask, in the interests of exact science, if any British-killed example of the hooded merganser can be produced and authenticated?

Their different styles of diving further serve to distinguish certain kinds of fowl at a distance. Thus most of the diving-ducks, together with mergansers and the big sea-divers *(Colymbi,)* dive direct from a swimming position; whereas others—as the tufted duck, all the grebes, cormorants, and shags—when they dive, jump clean out of the water, taking a regular "header." On calm, inland waters I have seen both scaup and golden-eye do much the same, but not on the tide.

The big sea-divers, as is well known, possess a power of submerging the whole body when alarmed, and one sees them, with grebes and cormorants, steaming full speed ahead with nothing in sight but the head and neck—the back-feathers just awash. The great northern diver is the champion of his class of "professionals." He can do a quarter of a mile under water without turning a feather. Then should a following boat be pressing him too hard, he will instantly disappear with a lunging roll, more like a seal or a big salmon than a bird; but taking in sufficient breath during his momentary contact with

the upper air, to do 200 yards more at racing speed. All the sea-divers may be known from any other species by their thick, erect necks, which show three-fourths white, and (at short distance) by the sharp pointed head and beak carried at a rigid right angle. Moreover they are always single; as are also the grebes. They swim as low as mergansers, but, of course, the latter are recognisable at a glance by their long slim necks, almost snake-like, and by their crested heads.

I am quite aware that I have now drifted away into a class of birds that have no proper claim to be regarded as wildfowl. No regular gunner would ever waste a cartridge on them. Still they are sure to attract the attention of the amateur fowler, and their smart and often weird appearance on wing or water will certainly induce a desire for closer acquaintance. For his benefit I will, therefore, insert the following simple table, by which he may at a glance recognise the different species of the grebe family, since all these birds are practically alike in winter—that is, in colour (plain black or dusky, and white)—most puzzling to a beginner.

Grebes.	Weight.	Colour of beak (winter).
Great Crested	32oz.	Pink, dusky towards tip.
Red-necked	20oz.	Yellow at base, rest black.
Sclavonian	12oz.	Pink base, black band, white tip.
Eared	12oz.	Black: base of under mandible pink—"tiptilted."
Dabchick	6oz.	(No note as to this.)

I can find no note as to the dabchick, but that bird is seldom or never seen on salt water, and, when met with, will at once be recognised by its absurdly small size, hardly bigger than a cock robin! Some of the grebes, it should be added, are already acquiring the ruddy summer plumage in March, and indeed, as early as the end of February.

Here are the characteristics of the sea-divers (*Colymbi*), similarly tabulated :—

Divers.	Weight.	Winter plumage.
Red-throated	3lb.	Dusky or black, *speckled* white
Black-throated	5lb. to 8½lb.	Dark slate-blue, *marbled* lighter.
Great Northern	8lb. to 14lb.	Do. do.

It will thus be seen that the two last closely approximate, overlapping in weight (all weights being taken from examples shot by myself), and agreeing also in the general colour of their winter dress. There are, I doubt not, specific characteristics by which the two may always be discriminated, but I do not know, or have forgotten what these are. When in full summer plumage the sea-divers are magnificent creatures—especially the two larger species. The Badminton volume rightly remarks "No collection of waterfowl is complete without them," but the passage omits the essential addendum, *that they must be shot in the close season*—for at other times the divers, and the grebes too, are among the plainest plumaged of birds.

With the divers I conclude my notes on British wildfowl. There are, I am well aware, several species to which I have not done sufficient justice; but that is because I have not had the luck to meet with them or to form a close acquaintance.

CORMORANTS.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUDING REMARKS.

THERE remain, before concluding these notes, several subjects that deserve a passing consideration, and among them I will take first the weather and the competition. Weather may truly seem altogether too trite a topic to discuss; I will waste few words upon it, but in wildfowling it possesses a special importance, and to ignore it altogether is to court needless disappointments, for upon it the punt-shooting sportsman's fortunes wholly depend. Thus, when the wind blows hard for days together, and the sheltered waters are lashed into seething white spray with flying scud in tawny spheres racing past his lintels, when fishing-craft are hauled up high and dry and big ships go by under storm-canvas—then, no doubt, is the chance for the flight-shooter who knows his work, his time, and his place (*see* Chapter II.). But for the punt-gunner such conditions are absolutely fatal. He dare not show his nose afloat, though twice ten thousand fowl sit under his eyes, all huddled together thick as they can stow on those middle mud-banks of the flats.

What can he do? His lot for the time is not a happy one. At best the village inn of some fishing hamlet offers but scant attraction for mind or body. The once whitewashed walls and sanded pavement of uncertain levels need not unduly dismay, but for their inevitable concomitants of spittoons, pot dogs with lustred eye, moth-eaten effigies of long defunct sea-fowl, and those prints—realistic horrors of religious import and Teutonic origin—that flood the corners of our land. The experienced campaigner will lack little of life's necessaries, to say nothing of its comforts and even its luxuries; still he is ever conscious of an atmosphere of all-penetrating "twist" that pervades even the homely ham and eggs; while rustic revels ill conduce to inspire either pen or pencil, already offended by rude environment.

What can he do? Nothing. Those are the evil days of the craft, and the fowler must e'en weather them out and seek counsel of patience—or go home. 'Twere idle, nor wholly free from a suspicion of egotism, to recommend, during enforced inaction, a study of these "First Lessons;" so I incline to the alternative advice, unless time counts for nothing and the sportsman elects to await, however long, the fowler's chance that oft-times follows a protracted gale.

Fortunately, fowling is not always, nor necessarily done from tavern redolent of beer, brine, and bad tobacco. To me are grateful memories of pleasant

days and nights spent thus, if not under vine and fig-tree, at least in all reasonable comfort, nor without resource when stormy winds did blow. Should such luck befall, be careful to keep the locality a secret, locked in your inmost breast; but remember, also, that in this sport you can afford to give nothing away. Should your Arcadia lie remote from the fowling-grounds it is useless. You may spend your *holidays* in that retreat; but when it comes to the serious *business* of fowling, every hour must be worked from the nearest possible point—be it pot-house or palace.

Next as to competition:—Coast-fowling being everywhere free to all comers, it follows that the amateur at once finds himself thrown into keen competition, if not with others of his class, at least with the local gunners and fishermen-fowlers. And almost everywhere he will find among them, latent or overt, a feeling of jealousy towards the amateur. At its worst this feeling is not unnatural. The local gunners, and their fathers before them, have followed the fowl, and in winter partly depended thereon for subsistence, from time immemorial. They have come to regard the dreary oozes where for generations they have dug for bait, and the little harbours whence they set sail before each dawn to the laborious harvest of the sea, as their own, and perhaps they feel (though they do not claim) some small "vested interest" in the fish and fowl. It

is not unnatural that these men should view with apprehensive eye the advent of strangers, better equipped and more favoured by fortune than they, and who, in their view, have come to take their bread and butter, or at least to compete with them for it.

Now I assert that this spirit of suspicion can and ought to be allayed and eradicated; and I would add with emphasis that it is the amateur fowler's first duty to see not only that it is so eradicated, but more —that, by setting an example of uniform fairness, forbearance, and conciliatory conduct towards these men, it be replaced by feelings of mutual regard and goodwill. Unfortunately, the opposite course is too often adopted, and by endeavouring to overreach the poorer fowlers by force of vulgar wealth, or by meeting unfair tactics with reprisals and otherwise, a bitter feeling is engendered which it is then harder far to subdue. Such an *impasse*, in my opinion, is as discreditable to the amateur as it is fatal to the sport of both classes. I frankly admit that the professional too often acts unfairly and provokes reprisals; but I would urge the desirability, under all circumstances, of extending courtesy, liberality, and consideration towards opponents. Do not grudge to recognise in some degree their local claims, and in all cases shoot fair, however unfairly they may at first treat you.

Depend upon it such conduct will come to be

appreciated, and the simple exercise of those little courtesies of sport, such as are commonly observed inland (nothing more), is never lost on these rough seafarers, and will mean many a shot saved for you (and them), whereas a sharp trick, or a shot snapped from under the muzzle of a rival, will probably cost you a score, in reprisals, before the season is done. This is, of course, reducing the question to its lowest and material basis; but it goes without saying, that a self-respecting friendliness and goodwill towards those with whom one comes in contact, be they humble or gentle, is of the ethics and essence of sport whether afloat or ashore.

Years ago, for a whole season I suffered from the malevolence of a rival fowler, who, for some reason never yet explained, cherished a spirit of ill-will. Not content with spoiling sport, he persisted in damaging or removing the gear from my boat when left unguarded on the beach, besides other petty annoyances. Friendly advances availed naught, and the cup of exasperation was well-nigh filled, when one March morning we found ourselves both "setting in" on a strong half-ebb to a company of geese ashore—he on my right. All at once I noticed the enemy bear away to starboard—we were not 100 yards apart—and a moment later, round a bend in a sand-bank, we "opened" a fine bunch of mallards, all somnolent in a winding creek beyond him. The ducks presented an almost certain shot

for him, being already within long range. I stopped sculling and backed astern out of sight. After his shot I went alongside. Davie didn't know which way to look, and in his confusion "drowned" one of his sea-boots. At last he held out his hand, and then wanted me to share his six or seven couples of mallard! That night he came along for a pipe and a glass of grog, and till his death, some years later, Davie and I were the best of friends.

In wildfowling, however, the race is not always to the swift nor the prize to the selfish. Thus, on another morning, in a wet mist just after dawn, we were working in, on the flood, to geese which we had made out by sound in the recesses of a deep bay. Presently, in the increasing light, we observed another punt creeping in along the opposite shore. On seeing us he at once increased his speed. I knew my man, and knew, too, that if I kept our lead —we were at least 200 yards to the good—he would certainly spoil my shot. I decided to ease off and await events, seeking shelter meanwhile. The geese rose wild, and, sweeping round the bay, sheered out direct towards us. Luckily we had shoved the punt well in among drift ice, and as the brents came straight in, like driven grouse, a tipped shot, nicely timed, dropped six almost aboard us, while two more fell ere the pack had passed 200 yards astern. Result: for us, eight geese safe stowed in the fore-peak before sunrise; for Sir Selfishness and reckless

haste, a salutary lesson which we did not fail to rub well in—*festina lente!*

The case of the flighters and 'long-shore gunners is more difficult. These men (mostly farm-hands off work) almost invariably bear a grudge against the puntsman, and will often sacrifice a fair chance for themselves in order to spoil a good shot for him. The flighters bury themselves so deftly in the mud as to be well-nigh invisible from a punt, *unless* they have their decoys out, in which case (and especially should fowl be seen near) the puntsman will do wisely to bear away, giving the birds a wide berth, and the flighter the best of his chance. Of course, the shooting is free, and there are people so grasping that they will do an unhandsome trick rather than risk losing a chance of an odd couple or two of ducks; but the course indicated is not only the fair, but the politic one. Unfortunately, the liberal-minded gunner suffers equally with the greedy from the enmities provoked solely by the latter.

It were, however, but scant justice thus to criticise the professional, or fisherman-fowler (who will not read this book), and to pass over in silence the misdeeds of the amateur who will. I have already recorded my opinion, in no uncertain terms, upon what I regard as unfair and unsportsmanlike tendencies in these days of huge guns and punts like torpedo boats; it is unnecessary to say more upon those points. But I would here specially caution

the young and inexperienced fowler to beware how he imparts local information regarding fowling quarters, whether they be in his own neighbourhood or others at a distance which he may have discovered for himself. All coast-fowling is free; on these points, therefore, let him preserve absolute silence, since selfishness in sport is rampant, and the competition everywhere keen enough already, without his helping to accentuate these evils. As an illustration, I will adduce an experience of my own—*ex uno disce omnes.*

Shortly after my articles on the "Wildfowl of the North-east Coast" appeared in the *Field*, I received a letter from a well-known writer on sport, asking me for particulars of localities, &c. My correspondent, who was an entire stranger to me, wrote that he was in the habit of going for several weeks every year to Ireland, as well as to Holland, the Baltic, &c., for wildfowling purposes, and merely wished to have an opportunity for an odd day or two's shooting between times at some spot nearer home. Under no circumstances, he assured me, would he think of trespassing or of placing a punt upon other gunner's waters, his object being rather to "collect specimens" than anything else. I quote an extract from the first letter:—

"Please pardon a stranger troubling you. I know you are an accomplished wildfowler, and may be inclined to give me some advice. I am anxious to have a few days' punting now and again within reach of here. I go abroad every year for wildfowling, but am rather in want of an odd day now and again nearer home. I may say I

have *no notion* whatever in the smallest degree of *putting my punt on other folks' waters*, and might only come for a week in the entire season. I want more to collect specimens than to get heavy shots."

Several similar letters lie before me. On the faith of these (unsought) assurances, and their writer's name, I gave such local information as lay in my power, offered the use of my boat, gun, &c., with the following result. Almost immediately afterwards this gentleman not only placed his own punt, with one of the largest guns, on the very water where I and others were already established, but proceeded to instal thereon a professional puntsman —in his own pay—to shoot all day and every day from the start of the season till its close! Not content with this, this gentleman-poulterer and wild-fowl-shooter by proxy caused nets to be stretched across the mudflats calculated to catch the flights of small waders, &c., by wholesale; and also endeavoured to establish a "decoy" on private grounds adjoining, so as—as far as possible—to deprive the local gunners of any share of sport; and this on open waters, for which neither he nor they paid rent, or enjoyed any preferential claim, and where from time immemorial the shooting had been free to all.

Subsequently he wrote me:—"My man is a most accomplished punter, single or double, and since he has been down here I should say he alone has killed three times as many fowl as all the local gunners

together." I took no exception to my correspondent's own shooting, nor to his vicarious boasting; but on remonstrating in mild terms against his employing a paid servant, who practically monopolised the locality, in face of his promise and the above-quoted assurances, he replied:—"Do you wish me to tell my man to idle about and do nothing when I am away? Surely he and the others all have equal chances." This latter remark, I should add, was wholly incorrect, as well as being beside the mark.

Alongside of *mala fides* such as this, the petty jealousies, spite, and unfairness of local fowlers sink into insignificance; but comment is superfluous, so I will content myself with repeating the advice to tell nothing—not even to your best friend, and pass to other topics.

I wish to amplify what I wrote on the advantages, to the amateur, of double *versus* single-handed punting. Here is a note, made in February, since that chapter was written:—On the immense extents of flat and foreshore, upon which wildfowling is often carried on, no amateur is ever likely to acquire that precise local knowledge which forms one of the first factors in success. There are strong currents and tide races; there are invisible deeps, and imperceptible shallows, where, though hundreds of yards from land, there is not water to float a punt. In such places, and without a pilot, the amateur will inevitably find himself fast aground when already, perhaps, almost

within shot of his game; then, should the tide be ebbing, he must at once rise up and use his utmost strength to set his craft afloat again, thus, of course, disturbing the fowl; which, it may be, were easily accessible by a "burn" or creek, to right or left, had the puntsman known of its existence. Or, alternatively, he will be left stranded on ooze and rotten mud for, say, eight hours, till the next incoming tide at length sets him free again. Again, should he (by pure luck, not skill) chance to avoid Scylla, he will almost certainly fall into Charybdis in the form of a deep tide-channel, where he loses bottom even with the longest setting pole, and where, in the strong tide-race, he will also lose control of his boat, which then swings round in the eddies like a teetotum, exposing to the eyes of the watchful fowl, broadside, gun, and all they wish to see.

One realises all this with vivid force when first punting in strange waters, or even in fairly well known localities, should one have occasion to employ a puntsman not thoroughly acquainted with the precise position and extent of every submarine bank or burn, every tide-set and fairway, each channel or *cul-de-sac*. And all these features, remember, are apt to change from year to year. Unless a man has nothing else to do, and is at the work daily, it is impossible to possess that full local knowledge that is requisite for complete success in single-handed punting.

Take another case, which occurred the day I wrote this memorandum. I had made a fair flying shot at geese, five falling direct to the gun, three "droppers" within 300 yards to seaward. Four of the first five were only winged, and ere these were secured—twenty minutes' work, twisting and turning in every direction—I had myself utterly lost the bearings of the other three; or, rather (which is worse), knowing nothing, I had a fixed idea that I knew precisely where they lay. Not so Achates. He, with innate or intuitive faculty of instantly picking up "cross-bearings," and having an exact acquaintance with all the banks, burns, and deflected currents, took us straight out to the three dead geese, one after another, and all in a direction almost diametrically opposite to that in which, if alone, I should myself have gone off on a fruitless search.

In double-handed punting, the functions of the puntsman are confined exclusively to the working of the boat, in accordance with the gunner's directions, which should be instantly and implicitly obeyed. This point must be thoroughly understood or mischief will result. It is no part of the puntsman's duties to interfere in manœuvring the fowl or taking the shot, which matters are wholly the province of the gunner. Lying right aft, the puntsman has only a restricted view of the operation in hand—he can only see towards the right, or, at best, straight ahead. I recollect on two occasions having been handi-

capped by my puntsman endeavouring to usurp functions quite outside his proper sphere. On each occasion we had wigeon within 80 to 100 yards, offering a *fair* shot right ahead, but a *much better* on the left, where the birds sat thicker, but, of course, outside the puntsman's field of view. Yet (for that false reason) he hesitated to obey repeated signals to bear to the left, with the result that in the one case I was at length obliged to accept an inferior chance; while in the other, the wigeon (the frost being intensely keen) proved so amenable, that, having eventually got the boat's head brought round, I made a pretty shot at very close range, and secured over a score just as they "lifted" off the sea. But those preceding moments of suspense were agonising, and the final success clearly due more to good luck than to good management.

Again, to revert for a moment to the vexed question of breech-loading *versus* muzzle-loading punt-guns; while fully confirming all that I before wrote on the great advantage of the latest, first-class, *modern* breech-loaders, I wish to add a word of caution as to those B.L. guns of "uncertain age"—that is, those built during the transitional or experimental period. Few, very few, of these are reliable in service. Unless a man is prepared to pay the price of a really first-class B.L. gun, let him be content with the muzzle-loader. I write this because there are numbers of the intermediate or experi-

mental guns always in the market at what *appear* low prices; but bear in mind that, for the actual rough-and-tumble service of wildfowling afloat, scarce one of these guns will bear comparison for a moment with a trusty muzzle-loader, which can be purchased almost at the price of old metal!

I have been told that I have not given sufficient prominence to a point which is assuredly one of the most essential factors in successful fowling—viz., distance-judgment. That may be true; but in my opinion there is nothing that can be *written* which will assist the tyro in that respect. It is, and must ever remain, a matter of experience and of long practice and nothing more, for it cannot be reduced to words. The total absence of all objects for comparison of size, or to assist the eye, and the prostrate position of the sportsman, lying flat on his chest, present difficulties which cannot be removed or mitigated. Could the shooter sit upright in his boat, he might be able to judge the distances to a nicety; but to do so while lying to the gun can only be achieved by practice. If wildfowl were all of the same size, the difficulty would be greatly reduced; while it is vastly increased when the point of view is a dancing boat in a sea, and the objects seen mere dots amid a horizon of grey waves. But in wildfowling, one can only judge distance by size, or apparent size, and in certain lights—or the absence of light—it is at times impossible to be certain of the

species or size of the objects aimed at. Here are the first impressions of an inland sportsman of forty years' experience, who last winter for the first time essayed to commit his frail bark to the treacherous tide. "As to judging distance," he remarked, "when lying down, it is impossible! Thus to-day, I *twice* mistook 100 yards for 300 or 400, and once fired a perfectly absurd shot when I *thought* we were well in range."

In practice, one gradually falls into a system of eye-judgment (by size and relative clearness of object) that is fairly accurate at short distance, sometimes dependable at longer ranges, but, in a general way, mere guesswork at anything much beyond 200 yards.

The pursuit of wildfowl-shooting is a matter not lightly to be undertaken. Perhaps in no other British sport—unless it be salmon fishing with dull-rising fish in a big and difficult river—are the advantages so entirely in favour of the game; and none, certainly, call for so great a degree of hardihood, patience, and perseverance. To gain an ascendency over wildfowl, a man must be ever observant, quick to seize a chance or avoid a danger, sound in wind and limb and in constitution. Let all those who have any tendency to weakness in chest, lungs, or elsewhere, be careful how they attempt the more serious service of this sport—such as night-punting, fowling amidst ice, or during severe frosts

or coarse weather—worst of all, when half-melted snow fills the punt, and lays the prostrate gunner in a couple of inches of "slush," that chills to the marrow. Assuredly the long hours of exposure to wind, wet, and bitter cold, will soon find out any weak spot, and perhaps handicap a man for life. Hence this word of warning.

There are two sides to most questions: and, in wildfowling, the following letter, which amused me at the time, represents the other:—"No, thanks! I won't venture again. There is something most fascinating about that punt-gunning on the coast—it is so gloriously wild and rude. I am glad I've seen it *once;* but once is enough. To tell you the truth, I did not get over the effects of that last trip for three or four weeks, and decided that the business was too rough for me. I cannot stand the exposure, *nor* the fare! My constitution won't run to staying out half the night in a canoe, and coming in to breakfast on a starfish at 6 a.m. I say nothing of dining on a sea-pie (made of scaup-ducks), nor of the mental strain that oppresses one from the moment of turning in—that dread that it is already time to get up again—lest I appear captious in your eyes; but—well, I won't come again!"

In these chapters, which I now bring to a conclusion, I have freely criticised the writings of preceding authors, and may perhaps, in some cases, give umbrage. This result I would regret, but not the

cause, since it is thus only that a fuller and clearer knowledge of the nature of wildfowl can be attained and further loose writing perhaps be checked. But, having been challenged, I venture to claim for these articles (together with my former series), that with all their shortcomings and imperfections, they are written with a technical knowledge of ornithology that no previous writer on these subjects has possessed or taken the trouble to acquire, even in a small degree. Ornithology is a science, and, like other sciences, demands long and careful study. It cannot be acquired by merely casual interest or intuition; nor is it ancillary to sport, but precisely the reverse. Many previous writers have been highly skilled and experienced in all the arts of the fowler (far more so than I ever claim to be); but a man is not an ornithologist because he kills birds, even in thousands; and in the matter of ornithology most of the works in question are lamentably at fault.*

There are those, it would appear, who prefer to remain in that pristine state of bliss; to them I have nothing to say. But it is my hope that the younger generation of fowlers, for whom these notes are

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* The late Mr. E. T. Booth was equally accomplished both as a wildfowler and a naturalist, and his "Rough Notes on British Birds" will, beyond doubt, be an exception to this. But the price of issue (£24) was so high as to be practically prohibitive, and, personally, I have had no opportunity of seeing it. There have been, and are, others who fully combine the dual character, but who do not write their experiences.

written, may therefrom acquire, to start with, a truer and more accurate acquaintance with the various species of wildfowl, their respective habits, haunts, distribution, and distinguishing characteristics, than it was possible to obtain from any written work when I first essayed the pursuit of this sport, some five-and-twenty years ago.

"NOT WILDFOWL."

APPENDIX.

REMINISCENCES.

CHAPTER XIII.

WILDFOWLING IN AUTUMN.

THE name of wildfowling inevitably recalls thoughts of winter, and of the rigours of storm, snow, and frost, with which the pursuit is generally associated. But it is not with winter that we now propose to deal. It is in midwinter, certainly, that the wildfowl-shooter revels in the best of his sport, and reaps the richest rewards for much hard work, patience, and endurance—for then the more bitter and severe the weather, the better his prospects of success. But wildfowling, like other winter sports, has its autumn campaign—its cub-hunting season, so to speak—and for those who can spare to it a few of the precious days of September and October, the stancheon-gun will yield no small degree of sport and of excitement.

The pursuit of wildfowl in early autumn may seem

anomalous. The September sun may shine bright and warm on British fells and fields; the summer may be prolonged into autumn—or, in certain years, it would perhaps be more correct to say be delayed till that period; the swallows still hover and twitter round the old sycamores, and midges dance in their shade—to a casual observer there may not appear to be the slightest perceptible reason why the tough and hardy wildfowl from the north should already need to seek shelter on our more southern shores. But it is not our British weather that controls their movements. Wildfowl are essentially cosmopolitans. They inhabit no one land or hemisphere, and recognise no frontiers, geographical or scientific. To them the precarious autumnal conditions of wind and weather in these small islands are of no concern. What *does* concern them at this season is the steady and marked approach of winter in their far northern homes. In Arctic Europe and Asia, winter commences early; the month of September sees the change of season pronounced and unmistakable. The tourist who in July or August voyages luxuriously to Tromsö or Hammerfest to see the midnight sun, and who finds the northern lands all bathed in perpetual sunshine, can hardly realise how short is the arctic summer, how brief the interval which intervenes between unbroken sunlight and the dark days when the snow again begins to creep down the slopes of those grim Lapland fjelds,

and the hill lakes become once more iron-bound in the grip of the frost.

It is these wide, wild boreal regions, the desolate morasses of Northern Europe, and the tundras of Siberia, that are the true home of our wildfowl: and when September ushers in the arctic winter, covering the coarse vegetation with a snowy mantle, and freezing up the pools and streams, the birds, perforce, begin to move southwards. Some, indeed, move slowly—the Brent geese, for example, can hardly be driven from their much-loved north, and sullenly, reluctantly, move on, point by point, before the advancing ice, finding for months longer congenial resorts in the Baltic and Danish sounds, and it is not till the great salt-water broads (*brednings*) of Jutland are frozen up—usually about Christmas—that these ice-loving fowl are at length compelled to seek our shores.

Others, however, are less hyperborean in their affections. Many of the delicately formed wading-birds arrive in British waters during August; those whose food lies chiefly among fresh water and its productions are naturally the most impatient of the risk of frost, and these reach us first. By the middle of August the marine estuaries and tidal mudflats swarm with newly-arrived godwits, knots, and whimbrels, along with hosts of smaller waders: while towards the end of the month the vanguard of the web-footed tribe, in the shape of small "bunches"

of teal, may be expected to put in an appearance. It is not, however, till after mid-September that there is much real opportunity of congenial employment for the stancheon-gun. Then, from day to day, there turn up on the coast successive batches of mallards and wigeon, and, soon after harvest, the first skeins of the big grey geese may be seen crossing the skies.

On a bright autumnal morning we launch the gunning-punt for the first essay of the season, filled with that intense enthusiasm which is never lacking in a true wildfowler, and which never wanes. To the grouse-shooter it can hardly be given that the glories of the "First of September" are fully appreciated—in game-shooting of all kinds there can be but one "opening day" in each season. But in the case of wildfowling it is different. No amount of sport on heather, stubble, or turnips during preceding weeks can dull its keen edge, or, indeed, appear in any way to come into rivalry, so totally different are the scenes, the game, and the methods by, and amongst, which it is carried on. Away glides the trim-built craft, skimming lightly across the smooth salt water, the wavelets dance crisply over her sharp bows, and in the crystal depths beneath her one sees the long sea-tangles and emerald green salt-grass waving to and fro in the tide currents. The air is pervaded with the strong scent of the sea, and resonant with the wild music of

sea-birds, from the low, weak pipe of dunlin and ring dotterel, to the loud whistle of curlew, and the harsh yelping bark of the godwits. A few terns, the last laggards of summer, still poise, scream, and dive in the shallow pools, and all along the shore sit white sea-gulls, careless of our passing craft, each graceful form mirrored in the still water or on the glistening sands below. Much as we love the moorland, and the moorland game, this is indeed a refreshing change of scene.

But the primæval instincts of the hunter must needs be gratified. However charming to eye and ear are these sights and sounds of dreary salt-marsh or estuary, yet the business of the day will not be forgotten, and ere we have proceeded very far the welcome spectacle of a pack of wigeon will be descried. In a broad, shallow creek they sit scattered about, perhaps fifty in all, some moving about actively on the mud, others drifting on the placid surface beyond, these all listless and inanimate, while several more are busy plucking at the long shoots of sea-grass that grows beneath them. A little patch of rounded grey stones they might be, but for their gently changing outline; and there is a character about the appearance of wildfowl at a distance that at once distinguishes them to a practised eye.

At the moment, they are inaccessible by reason of a broad, sandy spit that intervenes between us and their position—a many-tinted shoal, strewn with

STONES OF FOWL?

The separate reflection shows them to be Curlews; stones, moreover, never lie all at the same angle.

weed-covered stones, and bright with the greens and golds, browns and russets of the *zostera* and other marine plants. For half an hour we must wait, and enjoy meanwhile the pretty spectacle of these wild creatures at home, all unsuspicious, and revelling in fancied security. Through the powerful marine binocular we can distinguish among the nearest an old drake, still half in the ruddy plumage of summer, carefully preening his moulting feathers. Hard by, half a dozen more are splashing, washing, and diving, anon going ashore to dry and preen. Before the tide has flowed over the intervening bank, another little "trip" of fowl appear in the far distance, speeding directly towards us, and as they check their flight to alight amongst the wigeon, throwing up their bodies as a barque backs her topsails, we see that they are mallards. And now the flowing tide has covered the mud—nothing but water separates us from the little flotilla of ducks, and we gently move forwards. Critical moments, these! Now the punt grates slightly on the stones that strew the shore. . . . . We must still be patient and wait a few minutes longer. Luckily the fowl have heard nothing, and presently we again shove ahead. The craft flies with the tide—now we have reached the fatal range. The ducks are within seventy yards, and bear right over the sights. Wait, though . . . . wait one moment longer till the current has carried in those stragglers, and

closed up the ranks. Now! . . . . as we jump to our knees, we see through hanging smoke the track of the charge as twelve ounces of No. 1 shot sweep the sea, ricochetting for 150 yards. Through the murk we see scores of ducks spinning up like sky-rockets; but more than a dozen lie stretched on the glassy sea ahead, and others are sure to drop out of the retreating ranks ere they are lost to sight. One more such shot and the fore-peak is filled with fowl!

One advantage that autumn fowling possesses over the pursuit in mid-winter is the *comfort*. It is comparatively easy, and entails none of that severe night-work and exposure that alone avail to secure a good shot at mallards or wigeon, say, in January. In October the birds are young—newly arrived from northern solitudes, where they have seldom or never seen a human being, and they have not yet acquired or adopted those purely nocturnal habits that characterise them from November onwards. In winter it is rare to meet with ducks on the tidal flats *by daylight*. The fowler's only chance at that season is to seek them at midnight, under the rays of the moon—always a haphazard and precarious venture, and one that demands no small degree of the qualities of resolution and endurance. But in October it is different. The new comers being largely young birds, are less intensely acute, and, as already mentioned, remain about the tidal flats and

feeding grounds all day, instead of taking flight for the open sea before the dawn, as is their custom later on. Thus we have now no turning out at midnight. We can breakfast at a reasonable hour, get afloat quite luxuriously, say, at 8 a.m., enjoy a long day's sport, and be back before dark.

We have described a successful shot; but it must not be inferred that punt-gunning in October is all plain sailing by any means—no sport is more precarious, whatever the season. Young and inexperienced as they are, wild ducks are wild ducks—at all times amongst the most impracticable of feathered fowl—and there are, besides, a hundred other difficulties incident to this pursuit. When on the threshold of success, an alarm may be given by some vigilant curlew or redshank, even by a soaring seagull; or perhaps one gets into a tide-channel, loses the bottom, and round swings the punt, broadside on to the fowl. The longer setting-pole must then be got out, and between the delay, the movements, and the inevitable creaking of gear, the ducks are pretty sure to escape. In any of these events (and a score of such mischances might be mentioned) the labour, it may be of hours, is thrown away. Then, again, the handling of a stancheon-gun is in itself no simple matter. Without going into detail, the two following instances, which occurred to the writer during last season, will serve to show that there is some room for

skill and judgment in the working of a punt-gun. On October 21—(I quote from a note-book)—" observed nearly 100 mallards asleep on the mud; shoved the punt into a belt of sea-foam which was driving up with the flood tide, and which completely concealed us. We thus advanced foot by foot on the flowing tide till we lay within sixty yards of the ducks—not a bird on the *qui vive*, not a head in sight. Alas! for that silly greed, we decided to go ten yards nearer. Then, just as I was in the act of pulling (but before the deed was actually complete), the mallards rose. From a state of complete quiescence and torpor, in a single instant they were all in the air, and this without a sign of warning—a most unusual thing; one may safely rely, as a rule, on at least one neck craning up, and at least one low, premonitory alarm note. To-day we had no notice whatever. The shot passed right below them; only a single bird was killed. . . . . Next morning, early, I came on four wigeon on open water. At seventy yards' range they swam together, and I pulled, seeing *at precisely the same instant* that they were rising. The shot cut down all four about a yard above the sea. Had I had the same luck yesterday—for it is nothing more—I should have bagged a score of mallards."

In the one case the trigger-lanyard was pulled the eighth part of a second *before* the birds sprang; in the other a fraction *after* they had done so; it is a

matter of fractions. Yet in the one case a grand chance was lost, in the other a very pretty shot resulted: albeit, on that occasion there were, unluckily, but four birds to kill.

The two incidents just recorded well illustrate the importance of "timing the shot"—a point already insisted upon.

There are two drawbacks attendant upon punt-gunning at the very early part of the season. The first is the prevalence of strong winds, which are specially apt to blow about the equinox, and which often preclude all operations afloat for days together.

The second is the comparatively small numbers of fowl found together at that period. Both mallard and wigeon at first, as well as teal and the diving ducks, are commonly met with in little "bunches" of less than a dozen birds, looking as though they had crossed the sea in their original broods or family parties.

It is not till October is well advanced that one can expect to see those larger aggregations of fowl that bespeak the approach of winter.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO SEASONS ON HOME WATERS.

(1891-2.)

SEVERAL weeks of frost at the close of the old year and opening of the new, held out hopes for the wildfowler that were not realised, and the season of 1891-2 closed without leaving any very noteworthy record. The autumn of 1891 was remarkable for the scarcity of ducks on the inland waters, and the almost total absence of golden-eyes and other divers which usually make their appearance during the month of October. I only once during that season fell in with a single golden-eye (on Nov. 28), and the only other ducks shot inland (besides mallard and teal), were a couple of wigeon on Dec. 1, consorting, rather curiously, with a little grebe. It may be worth adding that during both the preceding autumns (1889 and 1890) we had met with small flights of tufted ducks—a species not previously met with, that is, not regularly, on the moorland lochs.

On the coast there was, during the season under

notice, a full average stock of wigeon, which arrived in September and October. The geese came in no more than their usual numbers, the bulk appearing about the new year; but there occurred no sufficiently sustained or intense protracted frost to aid the fowler; and, ill-used and harassed day by day as the poor Brents now are on the coast, they have been driven to a state of wildness and abnormal restlessness that precludes much chance of sport, properly so called. The glorious days of a decade ago have gone, perhaps never to return.

Wigeon, it may be remarked, were specially abundant in the seasons of 1889 and 1890, more so than for several years previous. The best shot obtained (in October, 1890) realised thirty birds.

During January the geese were numerous enough, but very few were killed—certainly not a single really satisfactory shot was obtained; the best on our part by my brother W., who stopped five—a paltry total. He also reported the following curious incident:—*Jan.* 13.—This morning, shortly after daybreak, as we were coming in to breakfast, L. (puntsman) suddenly shouted "Lie flat, sir; here comes six geese." They were flying low on the water directly towards us, and straight between us and the fiery ball of the sun, then just rising out of the sea, and pitched about a quarter of a mile away. As the punt shot in towards them, I was surprised to notice how closely they all crowded together—like

six champagne bottles in a wine-basket—which is not customary with geese. "You can fire whenever you please," whispered L.; but as the birds showed no sign of going, I held on for some distance further, and then pulled, believing I had six geese within 70 or 80 yards, and as safe as rats in a trap. But as the BB ploughed the still surface, all too short, and twelve huge pinions commenced thrashing the water in laboured efforts to rise therefrom, we saw, too late, our mistake. They were not geese at all, but six swans, which in the bad light against the sun had looked dark. Four of the six, in fact, being cygnets, were of a dusky brownish colour, which partly accounted for the mistake, while their great bulk explained the miscalculation of distance, for we now saw they were at least 120 yards away. Starting again about noon, tide dead low, we made a rather pretty shot. A bunch of seventeen or eighteen mergansers were observed swimming and diving along the edge of a sandbank. As the punt approached, they kept rising in twos and threes, till at length only a single pair remained on the water, and at very long range. Just as they began to "lift," I pulled and stopped both—two lovely drakes, with long double crests.

On Feb. 10th, a herd of twelve wild swans, all pure white, and including some enormous birds, were sitting on the sands on a sequestered part of the coast. My informant told me he drove his dog-cart

within 150 yards before they took wing. We had not the luck to fall in with these; but a day or two afterwards one was secured by a flight-gunner some six miles away.

Though their visits, like those of angels, are always irregular and far between, yet wild swans have appeared on several occasions during each of the last three winters. In Jan. 1891, we three times in one day fell in with swans, first a single bird, then four, and lastly with two cygnets; and I have four or five other notes of their occurrence. Here is one such swan incident:—*Dec.* 17, 1889—About 9 a.m. this morning we lay awaiting the rising tide to take us in to a pack of between two and three score of wigeon, sleeping and preening on a mudbank. In the "gut" or channel behind us a couple of golden-eyes had splashed down and were busy diving, when right ahead there suddenly appeared eleven wild swans, coming in from the north and trumpeting splendidly. They evidently meant to settle in the very gut where we lay hidden—already their huge bodies were thrown upwards, half vertical, their topsails backed, tails and big black feet extended and expanded to check their "way;" in a few seconds they would have sat afloat, and but little more would have been needed than to pull the trigger-lanyard, so directly ahead were they about to pitch. Just at this critical moment up popped one of the golden-eyes, not ten yards from the punt; the

interloper took in the situation at a glance, and at once rose with all, or rather more than, the customary splashing and wing-rattle peculiar to his kind. Alas! the swans (and wigeon, too) recognised in an instant the danger signal; the long necks and heavy bodies quickly recovered the horizontal, they regained full speed, and left us in the lurch—empty handed in the midst of plenty.

Another extract from the punt-gunning diary relates to a species which is not often shot on this coast:—*Oct.* 21, 1890.—A thick morning. Before dawn observed looming in the mist some big forms, which, from their height and bulk, could be nothing but grey geese. Shoved well within shot; but as day broke discovered that the punt lay opposite the thin end of their company—there were seventy or eighty of them; moreover, that beyond, and straight in line with the thickest clump of geese, sat a nice bunch of mallard—a splendid chance if we could work our way some 40 yards or so to the westward. This, unluckily, was not practicable, for the shabby neap tide was spent, the punt had already taken the ground on clusters of mussels both fore and aft, and was immovable. Nothing remained but to take them as we lay, and four big pink-footed geese rolled over to the shot.

These geese had evidently spent the night roosting just where we had chanced to fall in with them at daybreak. The tides being neap, the sandy flat on

which they sat had never been covered, and they had stood dry-foot all night. The young pink-footed geese are excellent eating, tender and well flavoured, and weighed 6½lb. apiece; the old ones weigh 7lb. or more.

From a local newspaper on Feb. 22, I cut the following paragraph descriptive of the rapid vicissitudes of this winter's weather—an important subject to the fowler:—"As an illustration of the extremes of our climate, we may mention that on Friday, Feb. 12, the snowdrops were in full bloom, with honey-bees flitting from flower to flower; the birds were in full song, the rooks busy repairing their nests, and altogether we had seldom seen a more lovely and spring-like day in February. But last Friday (Feb. 19) the thermometer fell to 8° below zero, and on Saturday showed 30° of frost. The birds, that a week before were rejoicing at the advent of spring, are now suffering the extremes of cold and hunger, and, unless a change comes soon, many must perish."

With the thermometer down to zero, and every prospect of a continuance of arctic conditions, one cherished not ill-founded hopes of getting once more on level terms with the Brent geese, after several years of mild seasons and ill-requited labour. But the fickle mercury played us false, and ere we had reached our destination, the ice was drifting seawards on the ebb, cushats were cooing, yellow-hammers

and skylarks singing, and the temperature rather reminded one of trouting than punt-gunning days. Under such conditions, there is nowadays little or no chance of sport with the Brents.

The 25th of February presented some curious phases of wild bird-life on the coast. The morning was foggy, and all day long a slight S.E. breeze brought in a sea-mist, at times so thick one could hardly see two boat's lengths. The effect on the wildfowl was noticeable, some birds entirely losing their way in the fog, while others preferred to remain all day at sea rather than run such risks. My brother A. and I were out early at the morning flight, but not a goose came in from sea that day—a thing we never remember to have occurred before. They evidently preferred to sit tossing on the rough waves all day, trusting for their food to such stray morsels of drift sea-grass as the ebb tide might carry out, rather than face the dangers of a flight in the fog, and perhaps flying into an ambuscade. The circumstance illustrates how intensified are now their fears, and makes one wonder if they will much longer continue to visit our inhospitable shores,

Twice that misty morning the wary mergansers flew within unwonted range of a low rock-strewn point, which there forms a salient angle of the coast-line, and two handsome drakes lost their lives through the treachery of the atmosphere. Whether the same cause was responsible or not, an immense

grey seal (*Halichærus gryphus*), estimated by the fishermen at 40 stone, raised his ungainly head within three yards of our anchored boat, but withdrew with a sounding plunge ere a cartridge could be lodged in his cranium. A beautiful pair of eiders, duck and drake, fell to one barrel of a 12-bore, the first shot in the morning, and a cormorant to the last.

At night the wigeon also lost their way. About an hour after dark, while we stood talking on the village green, the murky, vapour-laden air overhead suddenly became filled with their piping querulous whistles. Apparently they were hundreds strong, and for some minutes continued flighting and calling, low over the village street.

Among other noticeable birds obtained this year was an Eared grebe, shot Feb. 24, and which had already at that early date acquired the flame-coloured ear-tufts of summer, together with distinct indications of the black neck and the rufous flanks of the breeding plumage. This species is perhaps hardly so rare as I had imagined, for, besides the above, of three grebes, shot Jan. 17, 1890, one proved to be *Podiceps nigricollis*, making two specimens obtained in three years; though up to the date of publishing "Bird-Life of the Borders" (1889), we had only secured one in the preceding twenty seasons. The Slavonian grebe is, however, much the most numerous. In January, 1891, we also shot

one of the larger red-necked grebes, weight 18½oz., whose gullet was well stuffed with shrimps.

(1892-3.)

The feature this winter was the unusual abundance of wild swans, which appeared in greater numbers than have been known on the north-east coast for twenty years. First appearing soon after the new year, by the middle of January swans were reported in several different districts, taking up their quarters both on the coast and inland. A herd of thirteen, including several cygnets, frequented the Monkridge Flats, a wide, rushy bog on Reedwater, some twenty-five miles from the sea, others settled themselves in the valleys of North and South Tyne, Tweed, and other Border rivers. One January day, while partridge shooting, we observed a bunch of seven, all adults, flying up and down the Till, presently pitching in a grass field, where they might easily have been stalked. It is, however, unnecessary to enumerate all the various spots and dates at which wild swans have been seen ; for example, while punt-gunning on the coast during February, we noticed swans on nearly every day when the weather allowed us to go afloat. The whole of those which I have had an opportunity of handling, or of examining at sufficiently close quarters, were whoopers, and the great majority adults. Several birds, however, which I take to be two-year-old cygnets, and which had

almost acquired the full snow-white plumage, had not attained the yellow beaks, that part remaining greyish white, or very pale flesh-colour. The general appearance of a herd of whoopers, whether on wing or water, is sufficiently impressive; when flying the long necks are held rigidly straight, and the black legs and feet are distinctly seen stretched out backwards, beneath the tail.

The bulk of these swans had presumably come from Denmark and the Baltic, where the winter was exceptionally severe—far more so than on this side—and where the closing of the navigation was coincident with the appearance of these birds on our coast. On first arrival, some swans are surprisingly tame and unsuspicious; while others have evidently had experience of gunning-punts and wildfowlers abroad, and cannot be approached within 300 yards or so, on open waters. Though most of the birds were evidently asleep, squatting down flat on the mud, with necks curled away over their shoulders, yet there was always one long neck held rigidly upright; and from that watchful sentry, long ere the punt could steal in to the point of danger, came a resonant whoop, whoop! clear as the note of a cuckoo, and which was the signal for all to wake up. The sleepy ones stood upright to flap: then in a few seconds more, the whole pack were on wing, rising with much splash and clatter, but getting quite clear of mud or water in ten or fifteen yards of flight.

Swans appear to spend the midday hours in sleep, their principal feeding time being the afternoon. In the early mornings we seldom saw them at all—where they were at that period I know not. But on one occasion while "setting" to geese, we fell in with a single swan, which was certainly hard at work feeding, about an hour after dawn. Curiously, this point in their habits is not mentioned in ornithological books; but, so far as my opportunities of observation go, I imagine that swans, like geese, are day-feeders. A slight breakfast is followed by some hours of sleep; the whole afternoon, from about 2 p.m. till dark, is spent grazing; and, except during bright moonlight, they do not feed by night.

The geese arrived that winter on Jan. 13, that is, "in bulk," for a few had appeared in autumn, some as early as October, and in the following month we observed fourteen together—I refer to Brent geese. They were very wild, even on first arrival. On Nov. 27 we lay within 200 yards of these fourteen, all fast asleep on a spit of sand and shingle—all save one, whose black neck never relaxed, and though, in hopes of catching him napping, we lay by them for nearly an hour, till the tide set them afloat and disclosed our presence, we never got a shot.

Owing in great measure to the larger numbers of these geese that visited British waters that winter, and in a lesser degree to the spell of fairly hard weather that occurred about the time when they first came,

more geese were killed during the season than for some years previous. Still, the aggregate bag fell far below the average of bygone days, and below what might and should be secured if this pursuit were conducted on fairer and more sportsmanlike lines.

Our first chance this season was at a big stand of godwits, and illustrated the necessity of well testing one's tackle. To get near enough, it was necessary to steer a wide course, so as to clear a knot of oyster-catchers, &c., on an intervening point; and, while already in shot, but before the boat's head had come round, or the gun could be brought to bear, the birds rose, offering a fine shot as they flew across our bows. Unfortunately the breeching-rope had so shrunk since the previous season that the gun lay too far forward, and no power of one arm could tip it. Thus was lost as fine a shot at godwits as ever fell to my lot. These birds, it may be remarked, are rarely good eating, being of much more rank flavour than the curlews. Later in that day we made a curious shot. While again "setting" to the godwits, we observed three diving-ducks right astern:—'bout ship, and as two swam meeting, I pulled, and to our surprise killed a third (or rather a fourth), which must have come up from a dive at the moment of firing and in a direct line with the other two. Only one flew off. These were mergansers.

Big shots at godwits are rare. Not only are these birds in winter intensely wild—wilder than most

ducks, and rivalling the geese in this respect—but the nature of their haunts is all against the punt-gunner. Feeding entirely on the drier and more sandy portions of the flats, where no burns or creeks exist, it seldom happens that water can be found to float a punt within shot of godwits or curlews in big companies. Till within recent years I never knew of a heavy shot being obtained—the best (about a dozen) by my dear brother H., who died last year (1894) at the age of thirty-six. This was made on one of the most arctic days of our epoch—in January, 1881—when so deceptive was the frost-haze, that both H. and his puntsman mistook the wall of godwits before them for geese.

H.'s bag that day was prettily varied. Besides the godwits, he brought in one whooper (18lb.), four geese, three mallards, and an old scaup drake.

Since then the record includes two good shots at godwits, realising forty birds—seventeen and twenty-three; both made on the flood tide, just at day-break, and during very hard frost.

November 26th.—A young eider-drake shot to-day, was very black in colour, showing no sign of acquiring adult dress beyond a slight whitish band above the eye. Scoters were very abundant at this date, and the young birds (with pale grey cheeks, throats, and undersides) were absurdly tame, sometimes allowing a sailing boat to run within half gunshot.

Dec. 18th, Night-punting.—Went afloat at 11 p.m.,

a fine night, with hard frost, but moon too vertical, affording no loom and throwing but a weak light on the water, which, moreover, was darkened by a slight ripple on the shallows. Soon after one o'clock got a very good shot, going as near as we liked. On "shoving in," saw several cripples sheering out from among the dead; but in the bad light had only time to work in four cartridges, ere the rest of the birds had dived under ice. The ducks had been congregated along the ice-edge, though I was unaware there was ice there till we ran in among it. We gathered thirteen, though I felt sure that twenty had stopped, and the rest were secured by shore gunners next day. Two hours later (3 a.m.) fired a second shot at about a dozen mallards off Redscar-burn. Four lay dead; three winged birds I chased for 200 yards up rather soft ooze. They kept all together, and I stopped one close by the full-sea mark; the other two reached the sand-links and at once went to ground in rabbit holes. This is a regular habit with mallards (I have seen a redshank do the same thing), and a most provoking habit, too, since one cannot dig them out without incurring a grave suspicion of "trespass in pursuit of conies." One could not reasonably expect a game-keeper, on finding two puntsmen digging deep in his rabbit-warren, to believe their explanation that "they were only looking for wild ducks"!

We had intended to go home at four o'clock, the

tide having then turned; but a sudden breeze coming away from the southward prevented this, and kept us out all night, sheltering in the creeks till low water—one of the many mischances of this precarious sport. Just as day was breaking we descried four mallards on the mud-edge, hard by. A longish shot (the punt having grounded) struck them all; yet all four went away, only to fall dead, one after another, before the last had gone 300 yards. Luckily, they fell along the weather shore and in smooth water, so we secured the lot. The aim had been a trifle low. It was past nine o'clock before we reached home.

Next night out at twelve; cloudy, and a sharp breeze ruffling the water, making it most difficult to see, and bitterly cold. At times, one had actually *to sit up to shiver!* Otherwise one might damage one's knees against the bottom-boards of the boat. Got one shot which realised eight wigeon—all, so far as we could see, that had been struck. The same afternoon we fell in with three teal—unusual in mid-winter, and especially during hard weather. They were very unsuspicious, and an easy shot "mopped them up"—all drakes.

January 17th.—The geese having arrived in large numbers during the 13th and 14th, we were naturally anxious to welcome them. But in this we were at first frustrated by the weather. A constant succession of gales of wind from all quarters, with rough seas and dirty weather, made operations afloat

impossible, and three days' efforts resulted in a total blank, so far as geese were concerned. During the latter part of the month a spell of calm weather set in, with fairly hard frosts, and, wild as they were, the Brents occasionally got the worst of the exchanges.

February 23rd.—What hard lives are those of wild-fowl during continuous rough weather, For three days and nights the wind has blown a full gale from the nor'ard and eastward; the hardships resultant to seafowl appear well nigh unendurable—that is from our human point of view. The birds presumably regard matters in a different light, for no signs of despondency can be observed, nor any relaxation of that intensity of caution with which they are wont to surround themselves. Evidently they still consider life worth living, for no created beings are more careful to preserve it. After a three-days' gale, the whole of the ducks for miles around, no longer able to "weather it" outside on the open sea, have sought refuge in the comparatively smoother space that separates two half sunken reefs, whose positions are indicated by white surf and lines of huge breakers. In this interval the sea does not break, but angry rollers tumble athwart one another, impelled by a medley of cross-currents and tide races. The height of the swell we can judge by the contortions of the buoy which marks the channel, and which seems at times to rise and fall a dozen feet or more vertically. In

this shelter (?) are assembled some thousands of ducks—as they "lift" on the swell, the white-breaking background fairly bristles with necks, like a *chevaux de frise.* In the stress of the hour the game-ducks find themselves associated for once with their more purely marine congeners; amidst the host we can distinguish golden-eyes, scoters, and velvet ducks, scaup, eider, and long-tailed ducks; but no boat can go near them in such a sea. As the tide carries them too near the inner breakers, the ducks rise in detachments like swarms of bees, and fly a few hundred yards to seaward.

At mid-day, tide being dead low, we launched a boat to reconnoitre their position: but it was impossible, and after a pretty wet quarter of an hour we had to recognise the fact. In a sheltered bight sat three grebes in smooth water: but we were still in the rough, and shooting from a dancing boat is as difficult as from a galloping horse. The second barrel stopped one bird of the Slavonian kind. Boat-work being impossible, we went to lie in wait on one of the flight-points of the coast, anchoring the coble hard by, so as to "wear" towards the gun any fowl that might come up on the flood. Great balls of yellow foam bounded across the rocks, and the sea horizon showed all distorted and upheaved. At intervals also came storms of snow, hail, and ice-crystals driving horizontally, and blotting out one's view. During a lull a black spot on the tumble of

hissing waves in front caught my eye—a goose, surely. Then came the snow, and when the blast had passed by, nine Brents were drifting inwards past my promontory. In a few minutes the tide would bring them round within easy reach; but just then came the rush of a wave from behind, and I was lying in two inches of salt water. A second notice to quit followed fast—it was necessary to take the long sitting shot, and one Brent lay dead. As the tide flowed, several small bunches of geese came up. The first numbered near a score, and though with the wind under their quarter, they came faster than driven grouse, yet on seeing me rise from the sea-weed they spun up in a cluster, and two fell—one winged, the other dead, a quarter mile to leeward. Three more shots at geese produced one bird, and a double brought down a wigeon drake from the clouds. I missed this lot badly with the right, but killed the "skier." The speed of wildfowl on such a day is very great, as was exemplified by this and by another shot. A string of eight geese came right overhead —shot at the leading bird, a clean miss; hit another hard with the left, and was busy marking him (he eventually fell dead), when flop came a goose in the shallow water close beside me! This bird had been killed by the first barrel, but the boatman afterwards told me it was the *last but one* of the string. Now, as just stated, I had shot at the *first*, and *thought* I held well ahead. Such shots, though they score a

kill, are really misses, and bad ones. Several chances at eiders, and two at single merganser drakes also offered, but not wanting these, I reserved my cartridges for geese, and before half-flood we had to retire, the sea rising so fast. So ended a lucky and exceptional interlude, but the bitterness of the blast and cold had been intense.

It may be asked by wildfowlers, Why were these little parties of geese flighting so late as two o'clock in the afternoon? The reason was that even at this late date (end of February) they were all strangers —new arrivals from abroad; and, curiously, most of these new-comers were in that wing-barred plumage which is believed to indicate immaturity. In proof of that, here is another incident which occurred a few days later. Having vainly tried all we knew to take the punt within fair shot of the main bodies of geese, and failed a dozen times daily, we at length observed a little family group of seven, feeding afloat and apart from a great phalanx, which stood loudly "parliamenting" on the mud beyond. Towards the seven we set in. They were evidently not yet admitted to the great fraternity; for when the latter rose, the strangers merely swam—though faster at first than we could push—in the same direction. Clearly they were outside the social pale. Presently we were within shot, and when five were nicely grouped, I pulled, killing four, all wing-barred birds. The three survivors twice circled round their lost

messmates, showing us clearly that they, too, were all of the same kind—*i.e.*, birds in the presumed young plumage. We had another similar experience later. Whether young birds or otherwise, these little family groups of strangers were clearly all of the bar-winged kind, they all kept aloof from the big packs, and were also much less suspicious and easier of approach.

Brent geese are subject to other curious variations in plumage which I have already described elsewhere ("Bird-life of the Borders," p. 198). It may be, though I do not assert it as a fact, that these variations are unconnected with distinctions of age or sex; but form the mark of different local races. Possibly the plain-plumaged Brents (which constitute the great bulk of our East coast geese) come exclusively from Spitsbergen and Kolguev—I may remark that all the geese we shot in Spitsbergen belonged to this type—while the bar-winged and dark-breasted forms may prove to be the produce of Novaya Zemlya and the eastern Arctic region, which latter varieties normally winter in the Baltic, &c., and only advance so far west as the British Isles under special climatic conditions—such as an exceptionally severe winter abroad.

CHAPTER XV.

MORNING FLIGHT.*

A DIRTY night with rising wind and fast falling barometer, followed upon a long and fortunate day's fowling afloat. We just got ashore in time, for an hour later it was blowing half a gale, and with the glass still drooping to the neighbourhood of 28″, all hopes of punt-gunning on the morrow were abandoned, and we turned in early, after arranging that, should the wind hold, we would try the "early flight" at a point some few miles distant.

About the middle watch we were awakened by a sounding crash and the rattle of breaking glass —one half of the crazy casement had blown bodily inwards—and through the breach swirled snow and volumes of night-wind of the force denominated "nine." This speedily turned our quarters inside out and left the position untenable, even after an old oilskin had been nailed over the gap.

Hardly had we dressed, descended, and induced

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* The substance of this chapter appeared some years ago as an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.—A.C.

some coffee to boil, than a thump on the outer door announced the arrival of the skipper who had come to call us. The hour was 4.30 when we turned out —facing the gale for the second time that night, and started to pick a doubtful way amidst piles of mussel-shells, open drains and piscatorial refuse, towards the harbour.

It still wanted a quarter to five, yet already at that early hour a knot of fishermen stood assembled at their "look-out" upon the cliff, looming in the darkness like a pack of cormorants that had roosted there. Our crew emerged from among them, and we climbed down the craggy track, plunged and stumbled across slippery foreshores and weed-clad rock where great yellow flakes of foam, storm-driven, whirl towards the land. The small boat is launched, guns, gear and gunners transhipped to the larger coble which rides at anchor a stone's throw from shore (rough work in the dark and a half-breaking sea), and we pull away in the gloom, past a couple of wind-bound schooners straining on their cables. It is all oar-work this morning, for the wind is foul and the flood-tide is also dead against us. It is blowing a full gale now from north and west, that is, right off-shore, which signifies the most favourable conditions for flighting, since geese are apt to fly low when they have a hurricane straight in their teeth. The night-feeding duck and wigeon are already amove long before we can reach our intended post, and we hear

their well-known notes as they speed seaward on the wings of the wind. There is no chance of a shot at *them* this morning; the off-shore gale is all in their favour; in an easterly wind we sometimes score a pair or two by sunrise.

An hour's hard pulling and a dusky object looms up ahead: it is a ridge of plutonic rock which projects far into the channel and has created a long gravel-spit beyond. It is here that we propose taking our positions. One gun is put ashore on the point and the boat rowed off to mid-channel, 200 yards distant, whence as she swings to her anchor we can just make out J. ensconsing himself on an oilskin at the furthest shingly point of the reef. For some little time there is nothing to do but watch the distant flashes of the lighthouse on the Haskerland Head or to listen covetously to the sibilation of wigeon as they pass to sea, far beyond reach. First to appear are a trio of mergansers; high and fast they disappear in the darkness, regardless of a futile effort to detain them, for creatures built by nature to mock resistance of solid water, heed not the conditions of yielding air.

In the leaden-hued jumble of tumbling waves, clouds and flying scud, which form the horizon to seaward, it is not easy to distinguish objects, and a sharp look-out is very necessary if the gunner is not to be taken unawares. For it is still three quarters dark, and the point of a wing going 150

strokes to the minute, and seen but for a second, may be all the notice he will have. Note, that the object which just caught the corner of your eye, is a *bird*, coming in from sea about as fast and as straight as a cannon-ball, and not a yard clear of the waves. It is a grebe, and hardly is the cartridge replaced than, as a whirlwind, a cloud of winged forms sweep in from behind. The sight of the boat breaks their ranks, but they pass between the guns and a small crowd splash down into the sea. Up anchor, and half a score are gathered—five godwits, the rest knots. The run of the flood-tide is now making our berth afloat anything but comfortable, but as the anchor is let go, the keen eye of the skipper is focussed to the eastward. Far away in dim distance something is discernible to seaward. It *might* be but the faint outline of a cloud; it *is* the geese. To and fro they wheel over the sea, while we crouch yet lower beneath the thwarts. Three times they head in, but turn, for the wind is against them and blowing great guns. This time they are coming—yes, here they are, well over us, but at a mighty height. Surely no gun can reach them up there? But a modern full-choke, loaded with double B is a powerful weapon, and, though no immediate result may follow the double salute, yet if well-placed that shot will tell. A single goose presently separates itself from the ranks, and after carrying on a quarter mile alone, throws up its long neck, turns over, and falls with

a plunge in the sea, just as we would, in another ten yards, have lost sight of him.

Two more packs pass up with resonant clamour while we are away retrieving this goose: then a little string of seven wheel too near the point where J. lies, and as they pass us, one is seen to be in difficulties: for a time he strives to keep up, then, after a perfectly executed "tower," falls dead not far from the boat. It was almost full light ere the anchorage was regained, and shortly afterwards the largest pack of geese yet seen—full five hundred—essayed to run the blockade. Luckily a furious snow-squall coming away at the moment obscured earth, sea, and sky and when next seen, the geese were well between us, though at a considerable height. One fell direct, winged, another pair falling dead (as the two first had done) some distance beyond. All three were easily secured, as well as a golden-eye duck—one of five which inadvertently flew within long shot of the boat.

The light was now growing rapidly, and the sky to the eastward already brilliant with the tints of the coming sunrise. Dimmer shine the stars, and fainter and fainter flickers the flare of the light-house. Nothing is in sight seawards but a clamorous crowd of laughing gulls and a cloud of sea-mice (dunlins), flashing alternately dark and then silvery white in the early light. Then, just as we begin to think of breakfast, two large birds

rapidly approaching on a bee-line catch one's eye; they swerve from the boat and pass right over the point—weird-looking sea-fowl, their long necks and long bodies carried at a slight angle. J. appears to rise from the sea itself—so low and narrow is now his *point d'appui* amidst the rising tide—and the leading bird collapses to the shot and falls headlong, sending up a shower of spray. It is only a diver, or "loon" in the language of the coast, and after picking him up we re-embark, for the day is now begun and the "flight" is over. Two or three more divers, and a long string of oyster-catchers, pass along as we pull back up the harbour, hungry as hawks, and not a little stiff and benumbed by the long cold vigil. Never was sound more grateful than the grating rattle that soon bespoke the grinding of fragrant berries from Arabia.

Five geese and a golden-eye are no contemptible result for a morning's flighting, as things go now-a-days; and one reflects on the long runs of *blanks*, or of those mornings when many cartridges were emptied and not a feather to show!

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO SEASONS IN SOUTHERN SPAIN.

I.—A FOWLER'S WINTER (1893-4).

THE Spanish peninsula, with its immense expanses of wild land—mountain, marsh, and moor—has been the objective of many a journey since I first found myself on Lusitanian soil in the autumn of 1871. The bulk of these experiences are narrated in "Wild Spain," published in February, 1893; but, having spent part of both the last two winters in Andalucia, I can here add some later notes without entrenching on ground already occupied.*

The winter climate in southern Spain, though frost and snow are almost unknown, varies considerably; some years being very dry, while others are characterised by a diluvial rainfall which sends the great rivers down in flood, sweeps away villages, and reduces this undrained land to one vast swamp. The fortune of the fowler depends upon the weather, the last-named conditions being fatal to his success.

* "Wild Spain," by Abel Chapman and Walter Buck. London: Gurney and Jackson, 1, Paternoster-row. 1893.

The winter of 1893-4 proved a mild and moderately dry one: and though the snipe shooting failed, this was more than compensated by an unusually favourable season with ducks.

To begin with the snipe. Nowhere, in the best marshes, were there enough this winter to make out a good day's sport, and four guns could barely secure eighty couples where, in drier years, thrice that number have fallen. The snipe in Spain is a wilder bird than at home. This is explained by the comparative absence of covert; most of the best snipe-marshes being flooded plains where a scant herbage, burnt up by the summer sun, affords no shelter even to the skulking snipe, whose Spanish name, *agachadiza* (from *agachar*, to crouch), bespeaks his talents of concealment. Thus, of the above-mentioned bag, upwards of seventy couple fell to *two* guns—long accustomed to sport in Spain—while the other two, though good average shots, could hardly get a cartridge fired, save at a "sleepy one," or a jack.

The ducks, however, this winter made amends for any shortcomings of the snipe. Owing to the dry season, immense numbers were aggregated around the few and comparatively limited areas where water still continued to survive. Our first morning's flighting in the *marisma* remains a grateful memory. We were five guns, and, by lot, the best place (No. 2) fell to me. In a hollowed

clump of bulrush and giant sedge, midway between two long marsh-pools, I planted my revolving stool. Within a few minutes ducks in dozens were within shot—some passing overhead, others splashing down in the shallow connecting channel hard by. It was a pretty sight, and I enjoyed the delay while waiting till No. 5 (the last gun) had reached his position and fired the opening shot. The ducks were mostly teal and wigeon, but six beautiful gadwalls sat on the shore within twenty-five yards, while only a little further off floated a group of pintails, pochards, shovellers, and a few mallards, mixed. On the more distant surface I recognised, with the binoculars, among the coots which dotted the whole water, both tufted and white-faced ducks, while a pair of cormorants stood, "spread-eagled" on the further shore, alongside grey herons bolt upright.

With almost a sense of regret one hears the signal shot afar, and with it the rumble of rising wings. The spell is broken, and that picture of quiet bird-life that for half-an-hour we have enjoyed through the interstices of our reedy screen, exists no more. But another joy replaces it, and quickly the sporting spirit arouses, as team after team of ducks head in towards the deeps that lie on either side.

Now, for nearly an hour, the shooting is continuous; it is rapid work, and barrels grow too hot to hold. To those who have served the hard apprentice-

ship of wildfowling on British coasts, this hour's work—the cream and the luxury of duck-shooting—is appreciated at the moment, and never forgotten. Otherwise the point may be half lost, and the gratification infinitely diminished. How one's pulses quicken as a pair of pintail drakes, tearing through mid-air, come hurtling earthwards about two seconds apart; but that expansion of spirit is summarily checked as a single teal is seen to have careered right past within twenty yards. His erratic gyrations, we know, saved him: still it sends a qualm through one's breast, and one resolves to be smarter next time.

Now the firing slackens, ducks fly few and high, and the clumsier coots, in lieu of better game, induce a dropping fire. One has time to survey the scene, and to watch the felon kite, who, with many a graceful poise and sweep, endeavours to purloin a wing-tipped wigeon in his helpless plight. Presently even coots cease to dot the sky, and it is time to count that heap of emptied cartridges laid in front—those thrown behind we never tell. The register never quite tallies with the pick-up, since few but the dead-falls will be recovered in that jungle of sedge and spear-grass, cane-brake, tamarisk, and bog.

Forty-three index shells (though the pick-up falls six short) represent a quality of sport that but seldom falls to my lot in one short hour; though in Spain—that is, in favoured spots and seasons—such

a total is insignificant, especially as compared with the results obtained earlier in autumn.

The system of flight-shooting from sunken tubs or concealed posts (of which the above incident is an example) affords, perhaps, the best and most enjoyable sport, the total bag, in favouring seasons, often reaching a very large aggregate; but there is practised in Spain another system of fowling by means of trained stalking-ponies (called *cabrestos*). The details we have already described elsewhere, but the following incidents of recent experience may be appropriate here.

One brilliant January morning, B. and I found ourselves once more crouching, knee-deep in swamp, each behind his shaggy little pony. All around, far as eye can reach (and ten times further) stretched level marsh and *marisma;* here, for thousands of acres, clad in low tamarisk-scrub growing in a foot of water, there giving place to open pools or to narrow tongues of dry land, where deer find pasturage by night, and wild boar slumber in dense cane-brakes or jungle of bamboo. In every direction are seen wildfowl. On the distant horizon are moving clouds like a man's hand. Nearer are smaller flights and single skeins; a band of 200 geese awake resounding echoes in front: but the immediate object of our present endeavours is a mass of feathered atoms that crowds the shore hardly 200 yards away. Ten minutes later, and we have gained the dry tongue

alongside of which they sit. There are perhaps 300 ducks already ashore, while another hundred or two float outside. Each pony was steered by a "keeper" (if that is a correct designation for these three-parts wild *Marismeños*), who now instructed us to remain stationary, so as to give the swimming battalions time to close up with those already on shore. We sat thus, among low rushes, for half an hour, each behind his pony, watching our friends, the enemy, through the binoculars, at less than 100 yards' range. How extraordinarily thick some fowl—especially teal—prefer to sit! Here there was abundant space for miles along the shore, yet all insisted on crowding into one little bight not 100 yards in length, packed tighter than an election mob or sheep by a barking collie. Such close order was, of course, highly advantageous to our combined battery.

At the end of half an hour the floating flotillas, as predicted, had largely fallen into the main ranks ashore, and we commenced the final advance. With exquisite skill the ponies were manœuvred forward—now stopping a moment in pretence to graze, anon tacking outwards, or "sideling," so as to bring both our broadsides bearing true on the main line of the fowl. And beautifully true they did bear, as at last, on a given signal, we straightened our aching vertebræ, and raised our heads to fire—not over the pony's back, but over the slope of his stern. The nearest ducks were then barely twenty

yards away, and our battery included two double eight-bores, besides two small guns. "Now!" shouted Vergara, and, as a thousand wings opened, well-nigh half a pound of No. 4 raked their line in flank: while, at the second shot, it seemed as though the heavens were raining ducks and drakes. Sky, shore, and water were filled with dead and wounded, and, as we ran forward, lightly-struck ducks sprang on wing, and, with the cripples, kept us firing as fast as cartridges could be replaced. Those who have tried it know that a single winged teal or wigeon afloat will sometimes take half a dozen shots to finish, though within fifteen yards.

Not less than eighty or ninety fowl must have fallen to this broadside, for, though a whole flotilla of cripples evaded our utmost efforts to capture them (escaping among the rushes of the opposite shore), we fairly gathered and bagged sixty-nine ducks, besides sundry coots.

How completely this stratagem of the stalking-pony—that is, when both men and beasts are perfectly trained and up to the work—succeeds in overcoming the suspicions of sharp-witted wildfowl, the following incident will show. Last thing that night, when again advancing on duck, we had to pass three mallards that were feeding on an intervening splash—we had, indeed, slightly to alter our course to avoid them. Presently we halted exactly opposite them, and (as I afterwards measured)

within *eight yards* of where the three dabbled in the bog. Yet they still dabbled there, behind us, up to the moment when we opened fire, and brought forty-four wigeon to bag.

There is infinite scope for skill in the manœuvring of massed wildfowl with the *cabrestos*. Some of our marsh-men are past masters in the art, but there is a wide difference in individual capacity. No small degree of patience, and cool, calculating judgment are requisite in the fowler; while the training and aptitude of his auxiliary are only of second importance. In years gone by these fowlers of the *marisma* supported themselves and families during winter entirely by the produce of their *cabresto*-ponies and antiquated fire-locks; in summer, they relied on leech-catching—bleeding is still the popular remedy in Spain for most ills. Nowadays the evolution of sport has transformed them into game-keepers.

To work some of the more remote parts of this vast tract of marsh-land, we put up for a few days at the *choza*, or reed-built hut, of one of these keen-eyed, copper-skinned friends. Since my previous visit a new hut had been built for Vasquez on a tongue of dry land in the midst of endless swamp and lagoon; every vestige of his former abode (where, from the waterlogged earth which formed its floor, there surged out under-foot, fetid ooze and slime) had now utterly disappeared—sunk in the

quicksands as soon as his rude system of dams and water-courses had been abandoned. Once, in a former year, Vasquez and I had arrived to find the *choza* empty and fastened up. The family was not at home, and a curious spectacle awaited us. A donkey stood hard by, dejected and disconsolate, his white legs streaming with blood from leech-bites, while the whole stock of poultry lay strewn around, decapitated and destroyed—the work of wild-cat and mongoose. It is a pity that certain remarks made by Vasquez anent those beasts will not here bear translation. At night the señora arrived, rowing the last ten or twelve miles. She had been to the distant town with her children to seek medical advice and febrifuges.

It was noticeable that even now, in her new abode, the talk of this good lady ran largely on *calenturas* (fevers) and quinine—which drug is here almost as important an item as bread itself in household economies. I ventured to remind her that, three years before, every mundane hope had centred on securing a new hut on the drier site. "That is true," she replied; "we are content, for the children are better, and the señores are very kind in sending us good quinine . . . . . but, indeed, this is a fine spot to live in! All the spring we have the music of a band of 2000 flamingoes constantly gabbling on both sides; and in autumn, when the geese come, they sit there

singing all night long in the *lucios*,* till no one can sleep at all."

The flight-shooting here at daybreak was excellent; having only two guns, it was necessary to keep the birds amove by sending a couple of mounted keepers a league or so beyond, who prevented the ducks settling on pools not watched by a gun. The shooting is from sunken tubs, and lasts between one and two hours from the dawn.

After breakfast I started with a friend for a day with the stalking-ponies. We had not ridden far when C.'s horse, becoming terrified by some soft ground, plunged and sank in aft to a vertical position, thus depositing C. flat on his back in a foot of mud and water. Later in the day we had another accident; while making a detour to gain the windward of a company of wigeon, both our pack animals got bogged in a quicksand *(nucle)*. The more they struggled the deeper they sank, till nothing but the heads of the poor beasts, utterly exhausted and bleeding at the nose, remained in view. I never thought myself to have seen more of them; but they had now reached bottom, and after an hour's hard work, hauling on ropes, we succeeded in dragging both out, more dead than alive.

We made that day one of the most remarkable shots I have ever witnessed. By the further margin

* "*Lucios*"—*i.e.*, open sheets of water.

of an extensive pool *(El Jondon)* we observed a bunch of teal; they sat partly hidden among a fringe of samphire and half-submerged tamarisks that lined the edge. Hence we did not make out their full numbers; and, as the intervening water and mud were deep and heavy, we proceeded to the attack carrying only two 12-bores. On reaching the firing-point, we at once saw our mistake in abandoning the heavier artillery. There was no great number, but never were ducks more tightly packed—there must have been 100 on one dry islet no bigger than a table. Our four cartridges, aided by a single Spanish barrel of uncertain gauge—"something under Harquebus," say 10-bore—killed and fairly bagged just fifty ducks (forty-nine teal and one mallard-drake). This seems a noteworthy result, with less than seven ounces of lead.

We fired two more shots that day—neither of them big chances, but satisfactory in seeming each to realise the maximum possible result at thin companies scattered on open water, and the day's total counted up to eighty-nine ducks, besides a few snipe and sundries.

The last incident of my Spanish campaign of 1893-4 shall here be related, though with the premise that neither does it relate to wildfowl nor is it at all creditable to myself. It was nearly dusk, a dull night and raining, when, amidst strong reed-beds ahead, we heard a heavy rush. Presently, beyond

the covert, emerged five deer, and as they headed across the marsh, I noticed that one was a small stag. As they passed, half-broadside on, at about 150 yards, I fired. Unluckily, in changing the No. 7 shot in the Paradox for a conical ball, I had foolishly (and quite unnecessarily, since a couple of ball-cartridge always have a specific pocket to themselves) taken my eyes off the stag, and in that moment the deer had changed their relative positions. The result was that a big old hind plunged headlong, and, after one or two efforts to rise, lay dead in the shallow water. But ill-luck did not end here, for that hapless ball, striking the foremost angle of the chest, had passed through and killed a yearling fawn which ran beyond, and entirely hidden behind the luckless hind. 'Twere waste of words to dwell on the mental misery, the vexation of soul endured on that long ride homeward, ten miles in darkness and rain. Charitable spirits will forgive, as my Spanish companions *did* forgive me—one old friend, as he chaffingly bade good-bye, adding, "Better luck another time, and next year I hope you shall shoot *three!*"

The following figures from the game-book will give an idea of the excellence of the duck-shooting in the South during the winter of 1893-4, the number of guns averaging six or eight.

December, 1893—one week	746 ducks.
January, 1894—one week	400 „
Total.....	1,146 ducks.

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to add that such results are only obtained on private lands, which are as strictly preserved as a Yorkshire moor or a deer-forest in the Highlands.

II.—A CONTRAST (1894-5).

A WET winter in Andalucia—Southern Spain without sun—to what shall we compare it? Say to a melodrama without music, or to a beautiful woman to whom a niggard Nature has denied the essential attributes of Truth and Love. The picture, in either case, is destroyed, since the central feature, its integral factor, is wanting.

Seville beneath a rain-charged sky, presents a scene of abject misery. Neither its sun-loving people nor the semi-tropical city are prepared for such affliction, and their evil plight is not concealed. Beneath huge umbrellas, common to all, or in *tiendas* by street corners, they cower, enveloped in arctic-looking mantles.

For day after day, the green flag, fluttering from the turrets of the Torre del Oro, has proclaimed the port of Seville closed. No ship may come or go. The vessels in harbour are treble-moored and each "boomed-out" from the quays which lie 5ft. beneath a tawny flood. Here and there rise black islets—the merchants' stocks of good British coal: and jetsam and flotsam drives down the swollen Betis. Omnibuses are transformed into ferry-boats, and convey

belated wayfarers across the flooded thoroughfares of Los Reyes Catolicos.

Conditions such as these signify nothing less than a death-warrant to wildfowling. Marshes and *marismas* have become inland seas, tawny and turgid: while sheets of waters stretch across the plain where no water stood before. The snipes have gone—whither, *quien sabe?* The ducks and geese remain, it is true; but, scattered over so indefinitely extended an area, their pursuit is vain even where it is not actually impossible.

The season, nevertheless, opened right merrily. The first morning two guns bagged sixty-four ducks—all high flyers—in an hour and a half—exactly thirty-two apiece. Two other guns got twenty-eight between them, making ninety-two in all—mostly wigeon, though the bag also included teal, gadwall, and shoveler. But beginning and ending this year were synchronous. For that same night ushered in a five-days' deluge that flooded the country, and left no hope for the wildfowler for the rest of the winter.*

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* During December and January no pintails remained—they had passed on into Africa; but several marbled ducks were bagged, as well as gadwall, ferruginous ducks, and the others common to this district. On January 17th the storks returned to their nesting-places in Seville, being flooded out of their customary winter resorts on the plains. On the same date, black-tailed godwits were being hawked about the streets for sale—of course as "woodcocks." Curiously, many of these birds shewed signs of the ruddy spring-plumage. Stilts and buff-backed herons remained in some numbers in the *marismas*, and twice during January hoopoes were observed—none of these being ordinarily seen at that season in Spain.

There are, however, in such seasons counter-vailing equivalents. Thus, for example, game—both large and small—finds its range restricted in proportion as that of wildfowl is inordinately extended, with the result that there is no lack of employment for small gun and rifle. Then, as with drier weather in January inundations partially receded and favourite haunts became available, the geese hastened to return thither with hungry avidity as every morning dawned. These facts being duly observed and reported to us by our trusty watchers, we enjoyed, for a brief period, some rare mornings' sport with the greylags. Though not to be compared with the records of *exceptionally* dry years (such as 1889), yet the bag of grey geese made in January, 1895, quintupled the results obtained in the previous drier season of 1894, already described in the first part of this chapter.

Then the barometer fell once more: the rain again descended in sheets, and the flood renewed its violence. The sole topic of the papers was of roads and villages swept away, of landslips and railways blocked, of Asturian towns beleaguered by snow "eight mètres in depth" (!) while their inhabitants were reported as dying of cold and hunger. Nothing remained but to book one's berth in the Sud express for Madrid.

CHAPTER XVII.

BRITISH WILDFOWL.

THEIR SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS AND DISTRIBUTION.

Written from a punt-gunner's point of view.

IN the following list of British wildfowl, all species of first-rate importance are distinguished by a double asterisk; those of second rank by one asterisk; while birds which, either from their rarity or non-sporting qualities, are valueless to the fowler, are indicated by a cypher. A double cypher signifies that the species so marked have no right to a place at all, though they may possibly rank as "British birds."

The remarks on the different species are written as concisely as possible to avoid unnecessary repetition.

WILD GEESE.

* PINK-FOOTED GOOSE. * BEAN GOOSE.

These two species comprise, probably, *all* the "wild geese" ever seen by the "general public." To one or the other of them belong the whole of the high-flying skeins that are seen crossing the skies in autumn and winter.

These, and all "grey" geese, feed inland and roost ashore; for which reasons they form but rare and exceptional objects of pursuit to the punt-gunner—as explained in detail at p. 152 *et seq.*

* White-fronted Goose.

Far less common than the above—indeed, quite rare on the east side, though less so on the west and in Ireland. An inland-feeding bird that cannot rank high in the coast-gunner's game-list.

o Greylag Goose.

I cannot (much as I regret it) include this grand sporting species among regular British wildfowl. It may occur in winter; but, if so, too rarely to merit a place.

Whereas the three last-named are all of Arctic origin, and all winter in the British isles, the greylag, on the contrary, is of distinctly temperate tastes. Till the beginning of this century it bred in our own fens, and is still quite prepared to nest all over these islands—if the population would make room for it. Failing this, the greylags nest in N. Scotland and along the whole length of Norway; but their winter home lies to the southward, beyond the reach of British punt-gunners.

The following are distinctive characters by which the four species may be recognised, though (as is

mentioned at p. 163) the colours of these "soft parts" are subject to considerable variation :—

Geese.	Colour of legs.	Colour of beak.	Colour of nail of beak.
Greylag	Flesh colour ...	Flesh colour	White.
Pink-foot	Pink	Black, pink band	Black.
Bean	Orange	Black, orange band ...	Black.
White-fronted ...	Orange	Yellow	Black.

* * Bernacle Goose.

This is another bird of the west coast, which, while locally numerous both along that side and in Ireland, is almost unknown in the east. Arrives early in autumn, coming from the Western Arctic.

More partial to salt water than any of the four foregoing species, though less so than that next described.

* * Brent Goose.

While many-fold more numerous than all the other five species put together, and of general distribution throughout our islands, yet the Brent will never be seen save by those who go specially to look for it. For these black-breasted beauties are never seen inland—not even passing over on wing. They confine themselves exclusively to the tide—to remote mudflats and zostera-clad oozes, where they afford the finest of all wild sport.

They arrive very late—about Christmas—having left Spitsbergen and the Eastern Arctic region (where they breed) some three months previously,

and remain on our coasts till end of March, sometimes much later.

NOTE.—Canada geese and Egyptian geese are not British birds, except in a domestic state; while the "Red-breasted" goose may stray from further Siberia perhaps twice or thrice in a century.

WILD DUCKS.

* SHELD-DUCK.

The genus *Tadorna* links the geese with the ducks—one cannot watch the flight of sheld-ducks without recognising the affinity.

The present species breeds commonly among the sand-links around our coasts, but its numbers are largely reinforced by migration in November, when as many as 200 may be seen together. Feeding more on small shell-fish, crustaceans, &c., than on sea-grasses, its feeding-grounds are necessarily on the "dry," and its habits nocturnal or diurnal indifferently, according to tide. Always wild and watchful (except in severe weather), the sheld-ducks are efficient sentries to more desirable fowl, with which they are frequently found in company.

oo RUDDY SHELD-DUCK.

Essentially a bird of southern and eastern regions, and often kept here in domestication, an occasional instance occurs of its being shot in what *appears* to

be a wild state. But the ruddy sheld-duck has no right to a place in this list.[1]

* * Mallard.

As regards the coast, mallards are almost exclusively migrants, arriving in autumn, and departing in spring. British-bred mallards are among the most sedentary of all bird-races; and remain stationary throughout the year at the marsh, moor, or lake where they were bred. These rarely appear on the coast except when, in severe seasons, the inland waters are all frozen. They weigh half as much again as mallards of the foreign-going breed.

Mallards (of either race) are essentially nocturnal in habit; almost omnivorous as regards vegetable food; but all show a decided predilection for fresh water and its productions.

* Pintail.

Rather too scarce to rank as first-class, for its winter distribution lies southward and eastward of our islands. It is only in the Channel and in S. Ireland that the pintail is at all regularly met with in winter; though elsewhere it occurs casually, or on passage in autumn.

Less nocturnal in habit than the last. Though

[1] Mr. Saunders reminds me that in 1892 an "irruption" of Ruddy Sheld-ducks occurred in numbers apparently incompatible with the theory that *all* were "escapes." What has happened once may, no doubt, happen again; still I prefer to leave this bird (from a gunner's view) marked with a double cypher.

frequently found on salt water, the true home of the pintail is essentially among inland marshes and on those great stretches of shallow fresh-water that no longer exist at home.

o Gadwall.

In the main a southern-going species, far too rare in England to be of any concern to the punt-gunner, who may perhaps shoot for a lifetime without seeing a single gadwall on British waters.

Note. — Hundreds of gadwall (with other interesting species) now breed on certain strictly preserved waters in Norfolk. But this is exceptional, and is hardly likely to affect the present generation of wildfowlers.

o Shoveler.

Another southern species, which, though (unlike the last) it comes here regularly in spring to breed, is practically unknown in winter. For as soon as the young can fly, the bulk of the shovelers depart to southern Europe and Africa. Some, however, winter in the south and in Ireland.

Essentially a denizen of inland marsh and fen, I have never in *any* country met with this species on salt water.

* * Teal.

Though resident and abundant enough, yet teal

in the north are far more numerous in autumn than during winter. Chiefly depending on fresh water, teal are impatient of frost, and on the first signs of its approach hasten to a milder region.

o Garganey.

This is not a fowler's bird; for when it comes to our islands at all, it comes in spring for the purpose of breeding, and it leaves again as soon as the young can fly, and before the punt-gunning season has commenced.

The garganey is faster on the wing than any other duck, and as fast as any bird I have ever shot. As with the pintail, shoveler, and gadwall, the true home of this duck is on inland waters, where shallow reedy lagoons provide abundance of plant and insect food.

* * Wigeon.

Exclusively a foreign migrant, arriving in millions in September and October, and remaining till the end of March. During the first few weeks wigeon are apt to feed by day; after November they become purely nocturnal. Food, *Zostera marina*.

When found inland, frequenting large lochs, &c., wigeon will often afford a very pretty half-hour's shooting just after dusk. When the moon is full and the frost hard, the guns should be placed (well concealed) each to command some green burn-mouth

or shallow pool kept open by running water when all else is frozen up. One snowy December evening the author got seven thus in about half-an-hour, and his brother A. bagged six. This was at a small hill-loch, nearly thirty miles from the sea.

* * Pochard.

Though scarce and of irregular occurrence on the north and east coasts, I give this diving duck full rank, as it possesses fine sporting qualities, and is not uncommon locally — especially, it seems, in Ireland. A nocturnal feeder, and so fast a swimmer that a big shot is seldom obtained, for the closest packs scatter out into loose order long ere the punter can overhaul them and gain a fair range.

Some few breed here, but the majority are foreign migrants, arriving in October.

o o Red-crested Pochard.

A southern and eastern species, which concerns in no way the British punt-gunner.

o o White-eyed Pochard.

Another southern species which, even in Andalucia, is chiefly a *summer* migrant, and which in England may almost be regarded as non-existent—save as a merely casual straggler. Also called "Ferruginous Duck."

Abroad, the habitat of both these two last-named

birds are deep inland pools. They never frequent salt water.

* Tufted Duck.

This is more a bird of inland lakes than of the coast, though I have shot them on both. They arrive in September, but in winter appear to go on further south or west—perhaps to Ireland.

Tufted ducks are seen to be feeding during the day: by night I have not met with them. Some remain to breed here, nesting in May and June.

** Scaup Duck.

Exclusively a foreign migrant, arriving in October, and quite common on our coasts, though most so in the north. Always unsuspicious, and easy of access to a punt: though extremely tenacious of life, and not to be recommended as food when killed. Never found inland, its habitat being salt water and the sea itself.

The white forehead is no certain indication of the female sex, since the young drakes carry it till at least two years old.

** Golden-eye Duck.

Another foreign migrant, coming in great numbers about mid-October: but (unlike the last) this species is equally at home on fresh or salt water, and is found on every moorland loch, as well as on the coast and the sea itself.

Tame and unsuspecting on first arrival, the

Golden-eye, on the coast, soon becomes one of the wildest and most unapproachable of wildfowl. Its flesh is fairly good eating, much resembling that of wigeon. Golden-eyes remain here till April, and even May, but none breed in the British Isles.

oo Buffel-headed Duck (American).

oo Harlequin Duck (American).

Iceland is the nearest habitat of the last-named; thence, perhaps twice or thrice in a century, it may straggle across to Europe.

o Long-tailed Duck.

A bird of the open sea, common enough in winter on all our northern coasts, and of beautifully delicate plumage. But its pelagic haunts, and its wholly valueless quality when killed, alike debar it from ranking among true wildfowl.

o Eider Duck.

Breeds commonly in Scotland and on the N.E. coast of England. Yet the Eider must be regarded rather as a highly interesting resident than as an object of sport. Feeding on dog-crabs and the like, it is wholly uneatable. I have not been able to recognise any sign of migration from abroad.

oo King Eider. oo Steller's Eider.

Birds of the high arctic region.

GUILLEMOTS NESTING ON "THE PINNACLES."

Telephoto by R. C. Nelson.

o SCOTER.

A sea-duck, swarming in tens of thousands off the coast in winter, and many (immature birds) spending the summer here. But it cannot properly be regarded as a sporting bird, nor rank with true wildfowl.

o VELVET SCOTER.

Another sea-duck, though far less numerous than the last, and of similar habits. The same remarks apply.

oo SURF SCOTER (American).

oo HOODED MERGANSER (American).

o GOOSANDER. o SMEW.

The two last frequent rivers and inland waters—neither occurs regularly on the coast; and the smew very rarely anywhere at all.

* MERGANSER.

By its singular beauty of form and colour and its wildness alone, will often tempt the puntsman to try conclusions; but it is exclusively fish-eating, and of no value when killed.

Common all winter on suitable parts of the coast, and quite able to take care of itself.

WILD SWANS.

** WHOOPER. ** BEWICK'S SWAN.

The above are the two species which are regu-

larly met with here in severe seasons. Seldom seen before mid-winter, they sometimes linger late in spring, and both breed only in the far north. Their winter habits are described at pp. 134 *et seq.*, 148, &c. The Whooper is much the larger of the two, weighing from 18lb. to 25lb. and upwards, Bewick's swan only averaging 10lb. to 12lb. The difference in the distribution of the yellow colour on the beak is well known, and at once distinguishes the species.

o Mute Swan.

The majority of those seen on the coast are simply "tame swans" frozen out; still, it is just possible (as remarked at p. 139) that an occasional wild example of *Cygnus olor* may occur.

The Polish Swan is of such doubtful validity as a separate species as to merit no further remark.

WADERS.

The larger wading-birds afford, perhaps, better sport to the flight-shooter (as described at p. 19 *et seq.*) than to the punt-gunner. For a punt is but ill adapted to the pursuit of this class of fowl. Feeding far out on vast tidal sands, almost devoid of "burns" or creeks, the flatness of the shore rarely permits even the lightest of punts to float within shot of their larger companies.

The only wading birds that can be regarded as

of any real importance to the gunner are the following four, to wit—curlew, godwit, knot, and plover.

* * Curlew.

Common enough on all flat coasts from August till May, but always wild. The larger packs are seldom accessible to a punt till the frost has "tamed" them, when curlew soon become no longer worth shooting. The best sport to be obtained with curlews is the "flighting" at ebb and flow, as already described (p. 20, &c.); they may also be approached by means of a stalking-horse, in places where they are accustomed to see horses, carts, &c., crossing the sands.

In August and September only, we have the smaller species, the

Whimbrel.

Easily distinguished by its cry, a triple-repeated whistle, audible miles away. Known as half-curlews or curlew-jacks, but do not winter here.

* * Godwit.

Arrives in tens of thousands after mid-August. Described in many districts as a "spring and autumn" migrant, yet on the north-east coast the godwits spend the whole winter—however severe. Their sport-giving qualities being already summed

up at pp. 219–220, it only remains to add that the godwit I refer to is *Limosa rufa*, commonly called the bar-tailed godwit, though its real tail is not always barred.

The black-tailed godwit is very rarely met with on our north-eastern coasts—usually in September. This is the species that formerly nested in our own fens, and which still continues to do so as near as Holland, Denmark, &c., whereas the breeding grounds of the common "bar-tailed" godwit lie beyond the confines of the known world.

* * Knot.

Though comparatively small (hardly heavier than a snipe), yet its vast aggregations in winter, together with its edible excellence, entitle the knot to a place in the wildfowler's game-list. Arrives in August, and remains throughout the winter. Less wild than most waders, the knots sit so thick as to offer the most tempting of shots, and when killed are as fat as butter. Moreover they retain condition even after a week or two of frost.

* * Plovers.

The Grey plover is the only regular coast-living species of its family; and is of little importance to the fowler, being seldom seen in numbers—usually only three or four together, associating with dunlins, ring-dotterel, &c.

But during hard frosts, and when the snow lies deep inland, we have the golden plovers (as well as peewits) in vast numbers on the tidal area. So thickly do they then crowd on the last-covered mudbanks, that, as the tide flows, the golden plovers offer the most favourable mark for a stanchion-gun —that is, should it be possible to approach within shot. This, however, at such times, is by no means certain; for, though the birds themselves may be tame enough, yet the accumulation of stranded ice along the shore often proves an insuperable obstacle to a punt, and robs the fowler of his most favourable opportunity.

During August and September, plovers (and indeed almost all birds of this class) are very abundant on their southern migration.

o Sandpipers, &c.

Beautiful and graceful as they are, yet none of these are sporting birds, nor to be regarded as game by the fowler who is out of his teens. It is unnecessary to give details of their numerous varieties, which will be found set forth in all ornithological works. Briefly it may be mentioned that the larger section are only spring and autumn migrants, not wintering on our coasts. Among these, there come, in August or September, the greenshank and ruff, the little stint, sanderling, common and curlew sandpipers, together with the rarer phalaropes,

the spotted redshank, and Temminck's stint. All these pass on southward early.

Throughout the winter there remain the turnstones and oyster-catchers, purple sandpipers, ringdotterels and dunlins in clouds: with the ever-vigilant redshank, whose room is to be preferred to his company.

The green and wood-sandpipers are scarce inland species, while the stilt, avocet, and many other "British" birds must now be sought abroad.

"AU REVOIR."

Photo by H. C. Robert

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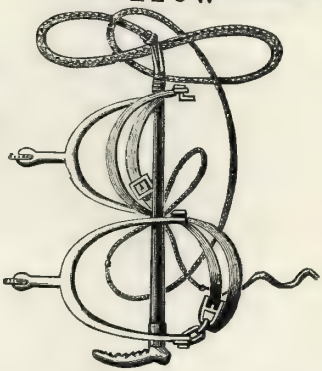

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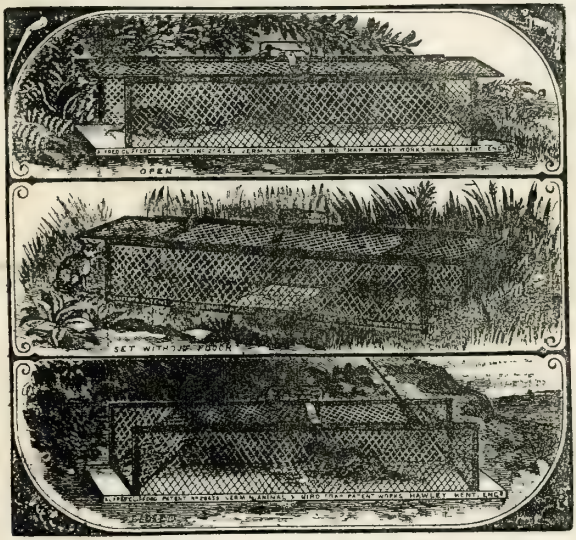

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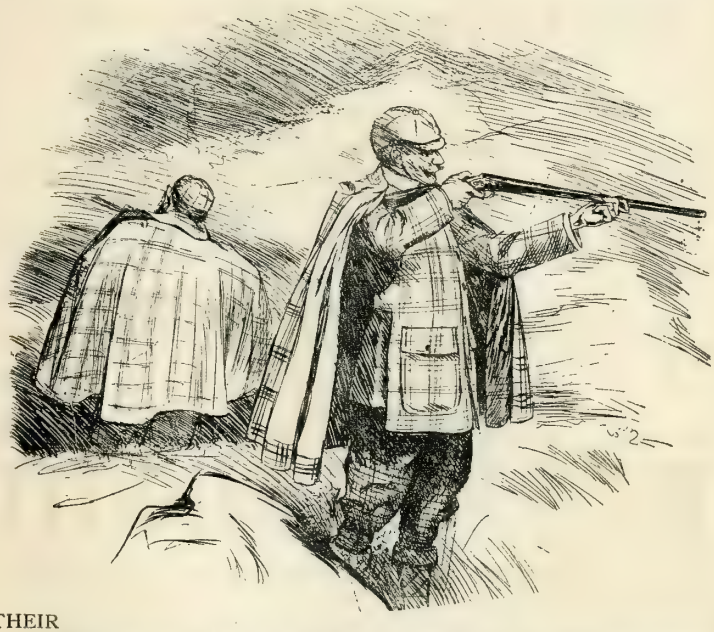

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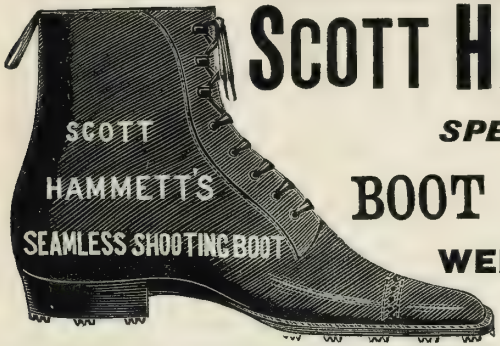

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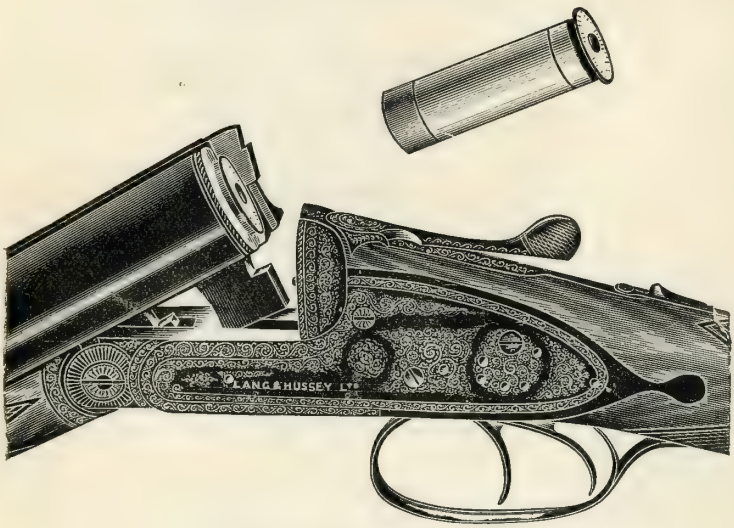

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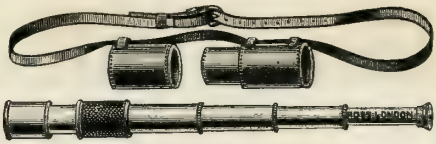

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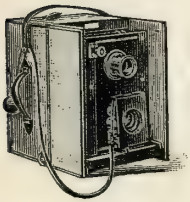

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